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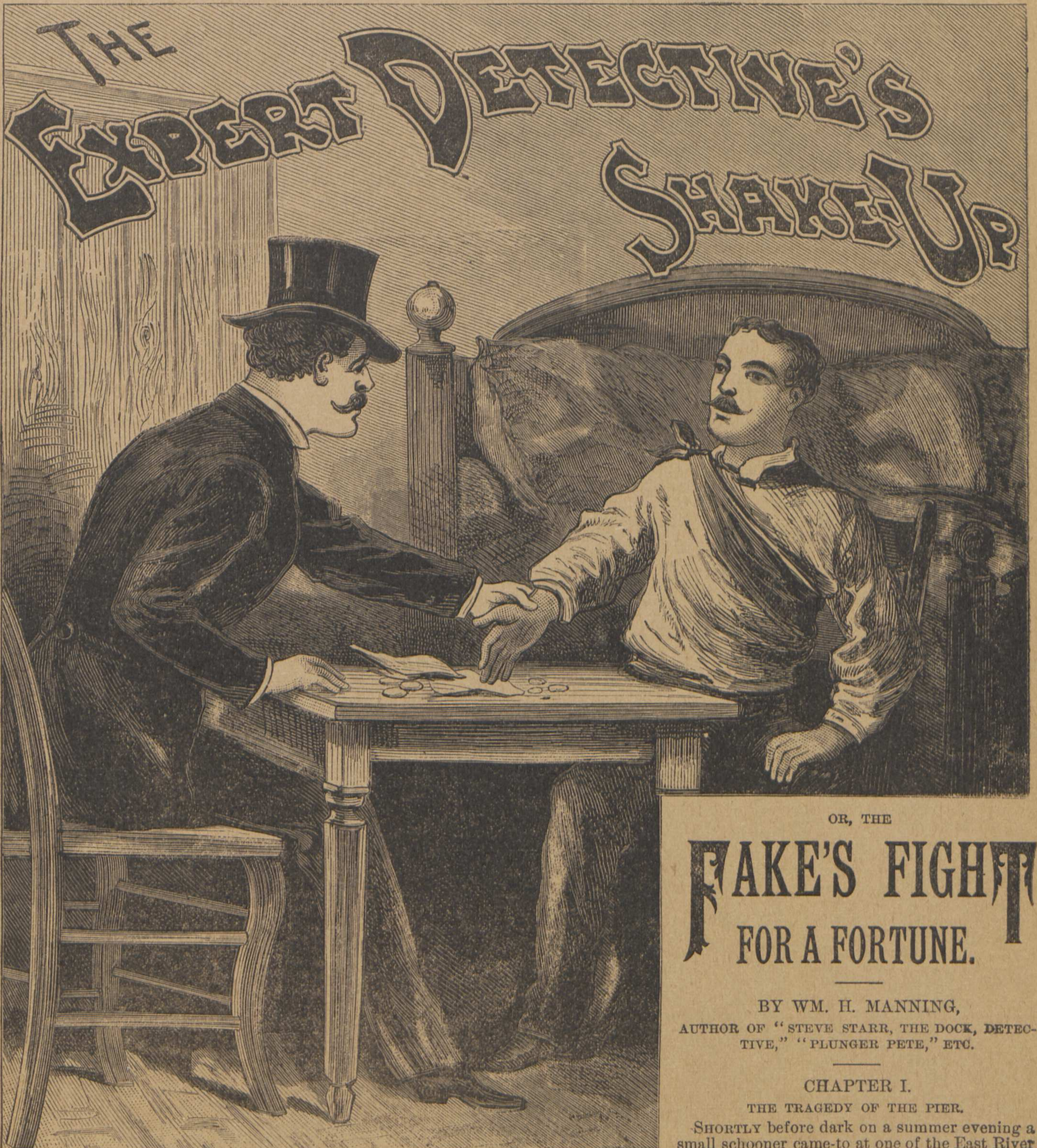
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OR, THE

FAKE'S FIGHT FOR A FORTUNE.

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AUTHOR OF "STEVE STARR, THE DOCK, DETEC-
TIVE," "PLUNGER PETE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE PIER.

SHORTLY before dark on a summer evening a small schooner came to at one of the East River piers, in the City of New York. That region always has its loungers at that hour, and these

HE REACHED FOR THE LETTERS BUT THE SCHEMER SEIZED HIS WRISTS.
"YOU HAVE NO USE FOR THEM, TOMMY."

frequenters surveyed the vessel with critical eyes and uncomplimentary remarks.

The schooner was old, storm-beaten and ugly of exterior, and singularly out of harmony with the romantic name painted upon her side—the "Smiling Sally"—and it was agreed that, if such was her nature, she had been smiling a long while. Still, weather-beaten vessels were not remarkable there, and if this seemed a little nearer worthlessness than the average of ancient crafts, it caused only transient wonder.

A sparse crew made itself visible for a necessary period under the command of a young man, who held a cane in one hand and limped when he moved about the deck, but, when the schooner had been duly cared for, all of this crew disappeared except one man. He remained on deck and appeared to watch.

Night fell and there was total silence on board the "Smiling Sally." Appearances indicated that she was to remain thus until morning, but it was not so. At just nine o'clock a carriage rolled down the street and stopped near the pier. The vehicle, like the vessel, looked old and dingy, but, as the point was not the best for the loungers of an evening, there were few there to notice its arrival.

The driver leaped down from the box and opened the door. Then from the interior emerged a tall, dark-faced man of some thirty years, who wore a long coat and a silk hat. He assisted another man to alight, with great care. This second person was of advanced years, with gray hair and beard. The driver was told to wait; then they walked slowly out on the pier.

When abreast the "Smiling Sally" they were hailed from the deck of the schooner.

"This way, gentlemen!" was the direction. "Captain Clarendon is below."

They passed up the gangplank, and presently disappeared below decks. An hour passed. The "Smiling Sally" rocked in her dock, and the river outside tossed the passing vessels with gentle sportiveness, the lights flickering and flashing with the attractiveness of a river panorama. South Street had never been more peaceful, and the masts of the larger vessels made a fine picture as they pointed finger-like toward the cloud-obscured sky.

Presently there was another stir on the "Smiling Sally. Men emerged from below, spoke briefly on deck, and then passed on to the pier. The man with the gray beard and hair, who had recently come, was escorted back to the carriage by his former companion and a second man. They saw him safely inside.

"Are you sure, Mr. Grafton," one of them then asked, "that you can go the rest of the way alone?"

"Quite sure," he replied. "It will be all right."

"Either Lyons or myself would be glad to go with you."

"Thank you, Overbridge, but it is not necessary. I fear I should be a dull companion, in any case; I certainly should forget you and fall into thought. It seems wonderful that I have recovered the boy I love so well—yes, I do love him, if I have not seen him for fifteen years, and all through my own fault. I was high-tempered in those days, Overbridge, and impatient with him. He was a boy! I ought to have remembered that. Young blood is not old blood; young ways are not old ways."

"Well, you have him back at last, Mr. Grafton."

"Yes, to comfort my declining years. My poor old eyes were not good for much, nor have they been for some years back, but he spoke to me kindly; he spoke to me kindly. He must be a good man. Good? Is he not my second cousin's son, and will not blood tell? He is named Oswald Clarendon, now, but I'll ask him to change that name; I want him to be a Grafton in name as well as by descent. Overbridge, you cannot conceive how this overjoys me!"

The old man's voice shook, and he seemed to feel profound emotion, but he

suddenly straightened up and added with dignity:

"It is manly satisfaction, sir—I am a Grafton!"

"We understand, my dear Mr. Grafton; we understand."

"I will go now. Timothy, drive on!"

A few seconds more and the carriage was moving along South Street, and the remaining men, returning to the "Smiling Sally," went below, and, in the cabin, found the young man who had given orders when the schooner made fast to her pier. He held a cane in his hand, as he had then. He looked at his companions.

"Gone?" he tersely asked.

"Yes."

The previous speaker rose, flung his cane violently away, and took several steps in the way of a skillful dancer.

"Let me drop this farce for awhile!" he added. "I am not fitted to be a lame man. Well, what did the old fellow say?"

"He is wholly taken in, and delighted to have found Captain Oswald Clarendon."

"Korgan Murch, you mean."

"Speak your real name all you wish to-night, for it will soon die. To-morrow you will be Oswald Clarendon, heir to a goodly fortune, favorite of Nathaniel Grafton, and lucky dog in general."

"Unless there is some mischance."

"What can go wrong? You say there is nothing in your past life to interfere with our deceit."

"That's right. When you see Korgan Murch, you see all there is of him—no relatives, no nonsense."

"Are you sure you have no loves and no hates?"

There was the slightest possible start on the part of the man who claimed to be Oswald Clarendon, and he looked the questioner full in the eyes.

"Sure!" he declared.

"Then all will go well, and you have us to thank for your good fortune."

"I never thought well of lawyers before, but you are an exception. You are as big a villain as the others, but have played into my hands, instead of trying to hang me."

"That's an ominous expression. Were you ever near the gallows?"

"If so, it need not worry you or me. I told you I had lived a life of roving, risks and ructions. That's true, but the board is cleared and the cards fully dealt for a new game. Don't worry about me. Suppose we have drinks and cigars?"

They agreed, and he brought them. He was neither owner nor captain of the "Smiling Sally," in point of fact, but he was doing the duties of a host, and posing as both owner and commander for the time.

As the trio smoked they spoke further on the same subject, and Nathaniel Grafton would not have been pleased had he heard them. Perhaps if he still had use of his eyes he would never have trusted them so fully; there was not a good face in the party.

Levi Overbridge, slight, bent and spare of form, was strikingly like a bird of prey in face. Barney Lyons, thirty years younger than Overbridge, was tall, heavy and upright of form, flashy of dress and supplied with a countenance suggestive of the bar-room frequenter and sharper. Korgan Murch was of medium size, dressed like a sailor, and rather comely looking to a casual observer, but he had the look of a reckless and hot-tempered adventurer, too. No judge of human nature would ever expect good from that party.

Presently their exultation gave place to more practical speech.

"Don't fail to be ready to go to Grafton's early in the morning," cautioned Overbridge.

"Think I will be late? Don't you know I tried to make you say I could go with him to-night?"

"I have thought it best to do this thing cautiously. We are trying to play a bold game, and the more carefully we play it, the better. There was danger that Grafton would take a notion to reject you;

to get the idea into his head that you were an impostor. So we purchased this dilapidated schooner for a mere song. She was ready to take to flight on short notice, if needed, but the ordeal has been met successfully. Now, all we have to do is to carry on the finishing touches of our plot. In the morning you go to Grafton's; then the 'Smiling Sally' will slip away from here and fulfill her allotted destiny!"

"No doubt your plan was the best."

"All's well that ends well."

"Let us have more spirituous comfort. The decanter is empty, and I, for one, must have one drink more. Let me go over on the street and get a pint flask."

"No, no!" protested Overbridge. "You are now a respectable member of society—one Oswald Clarendon, heir to hard cash, you know. It won't do for you to go to the saloons of New York."

"I'll go," interrupted Barney Lyons, rising.

"And I will accompany you as far as the end of the pier," added Murch. "I'm no sailor, and I want to set foot on solid land again. I am a land-lubber now, you know—oh! no, I am no sailor."

All laughed at his joke, for he had seen sea life, as Korgan Murch, for many a year, off and on. Nobody opposed his plan, and he went with Lyons as far as he had mentioned. Near the end of the pier Barney left him, and the New Yorker went on alone. It was not hard to find a saloon, nor difficult to purchase the liquor. He soon had a supply and was on his return.

When he crossed South Street he looked for his companion, but did not see him. Nobody was visible on the pier.

"He must have returned to the schooner," thought Barney.

Acting on this belief, he moved briskly along the dark pier and toward the schooner. He had gone perhaps halfway, when he tripped and nearly fell. His gaze had been directed straight ahead, and he had given no attention to his footing. Why should he, when he had known that nothing encumbered the pier at that point?

Yet, he had stumbled over some unyielding object so large as to cause the stumble, and greatly surprise him.

"What's all this?"

He had recovered his footing when he muttered the words, and his gaze, seeking for the cause of the stumble, detected a large, long object on the structure; something about its outlines, dimly seen in the dull light, gave him a marked start. He bent over it.

"A man!"

Barney Lyons was an experienced, cool adventurer, but he grew worried now. Hurriedly he drew out a match and struck a light. It flared up and fell on the object by his side.

"Korgan Murch, dead!"

He almost gasped the words. To him the death of a man, as such, was little, but this case was different. The death of Korgan Murch meant a good deal to him.

The match went out while he studied the scene in agitation, but he soon recovered enough to make a second light. Before, he had been sure, from certain signs, that the man was dead, but the question arose, How had he died so suddenly? He had been a healthy, strong man but a few minutes before. Now—what did it mean?

Again the light touched the prone form, and Barney had his answer. There was a clean cut in the breast of the coat, and over the garments and to the floor of the pier a red line was running—a red, wet line, terribly significant and ominous.

Big, burly Barney fell to trembling, but he did not lose any chance. He felt of heart and pulse hurriedly.

"Dead!"

With this exclamation he turned and ran toward the schooner. He bounded to the deck and down to the cabin where Levi Overbridge awaited the return. Levi was there, quiet and patient.

"Korgan Murch is dead!" he announced. Overbridge bounded to his feet.

"What?" he ejaculated.

"Murch is dead."

"Dead, dead? How? What—what—? How?"

Levi stammered painfully, but he was quickly interrupted.

"I left him alone on the pier, and when I returned he was dead. A knife was driven to his heart; he was murdered."

Levi's thin face grew pallid.

"Then what will become of our plot?" he shrilly demanded.

CHAPTER II.

A DESPERATE RESORT.

Overbridge had expressed the idea in each mind. Their first thought was not of the tragic death of their companion, but of the hopes that had been built upon him. They had known Korgan Murch but a few weeks, and cared nothing for him as a man. Their plot was their all-consuming subject of meditation and ambition.

Barney did not give Levi time to ask many questions. A murdered man lay on the pier, and there was danger that the body would be found by others and an investigation extended to themselves. He explained all that hastily.

"What's to be done?" he demanded. "He's out of the game, and we and the vessel are here. More, the police will soon be here. If they find us, what will they say?"

Levi was a man of nerve and action. He had been allowed a little time to think, and if he had no clear, cunning plan, he did catch at the simplest features of the case with hawk-like rapidity.

"We must get away from here!" he exclaimed.

"But the schooner?"

"Must go too."

"Where?"

"You know our plans. She was to go to-night, anyhow; this only hastens her departure. It is easy enough to manage the matter of the 'Smiling Sally' on the lines previously marked out, but our scheme for a fortune—oh! destruction, what a terrible blow is this!"

"The police may be here at any moment."

"And they will find Murch. Dead, dead, do you say? How? Who killed him?"

"I know not. It was done while I was away. Some assassin came and struck the fatal blow quickly, quietly, surely. It is a strange thing, but we have the one fact that he is dead, and we may be called upon to explain."

Levi smote his hands together nervously.

"Rouse the crew! Get them to work! The 'Smiling Sally' must get out of this dock inside of ten minutes. Let every man-Jack of them hump himself in terrible earnest. The schooner must go, and go with celerity. Hasten!"

The speaker was full of resistless energy when greatly aroused, and he communicated this to his companion, now. Both hastened to get the small crew in motion, and they did it with such zeal that there was soon striking activity aboard. The tide was sucking the schooner river-ward, and they progressed much more favorably than was to be expected.

The "Smiling Sally" moved; she receded from the pier; she swung into the river; she passed down the river, and then slowly disappeared from distinct view.

Of those who had been on board Levi and Barney remained, and they alone. Standing on the pier they watched until the vessel grew dim to their vision.

"So much done!" murmured Levi. "It is not likely she will be intercepted, and when their plans are carried out we need fear nothing from that quarter."

"Our greatest danger is here—here where Korgan Murch lies."

"Let me see the body."

They went to where Korgan Murch lay. This time there was more careful examination. They found no sign of a struggle. Appearances indicated that the assassin had come upon his victim silently, and struck before the latter had time to make the least resistance. True,

Murch had been stabbed in the breast, but the warning, if any, had been too brief for him to resist. Well had the stroke been delivered; he had died quickly and silently.

It was useless to search after so long a time for the slayer, even if they had been so disposed. They were not—Murch, dead, was of no use to them, and they cared nothing for his lifeless body.

Not long had they lingered when Levi started up.

"Let us escape while we can," he said, excitedly.

They hurried away from the pier and down the street.

"What now?" asked Barney, gloomily. "All our plans are gone to ruin. Lost, the hope of palming this man off upon Nathaniel Grafton; lost, the hope of riches. We have no instrument of deceit now, and we have ransacked the lodging-house district in vain."

Levi Overbridge stopped short in the street. He had seen nothing, heard nothing, yet he became as immovable as the house-front by his side. He stood and stared blankly at vacancy. His mood and manner were so singular that Barney watched him in silence until the pause, apparently frivolous, grew obnoxious.

"Well, well?" he questioned, impatiently.

Overbridge started.

"Eh?—what?" he exclaimed.

"What are you dreaming about?"

Levi caught his companion's arm in a tenacious grasp, his fingers suddenly endowed with strength that made the big associate wince.

"Do you remember where we found Korgan Murch?" Levi demanded. "He came from the Bowery, a lodging-house of the Bowery. He was one of the life-wrecks that float along that historic thoroughfare. There are always plenty of such men there—may not one be found that will answer our purpose as well as Korgan Murch? Is it not possible to get a second wreck and palm him off on Nathaniel Grafton?"

"Impossible!"

"Why?"

"He saw Murch—"

"With his old, feeble eyes; eyes that could not distinguish one feature of the impostor's face. Murch might have been black or white, old or young, and he would have passed muster. I, the family lawyer and repository of all the Grafton secrets and history, had told Murch enough of the boyhood of the real Oswald Clarendon so he could pass safely through the ordeal. It was not how he looked, but what he knew—and the pitiable weakness of old Nathaniel Grafton's mind. Even now, I assert he has no idea how Murch looked. Why can't we palm off a substitute upon him?"

"But he must be there to-morrow."

"He can be there."

"And the man is not found."

"We have the night to find him and to instruct him in the role he is to play. The Bowery is full of men who would catch at the chance—wrecks upon the sea of life."

"You are mad, mad!" exclaimed Barney.

"I shall be mad if this plot fails. Look, you! I am a lawyer, but who ever accused me of being cunning or successful? All my life I have plodded along, getting a living and no more, eager for money, and never seeing more than enough for my daily needs. But for my connection with Grafton's estate I should have starved long ago; I am not a genius, and I'm not a success. I have lived on Grafton's estate, and lived honestly; he was not a man easy to swindle when he had his mental strength."

"He has been a sagacious man, I believe."

"Thirty years have I managed his property; thirty years have I known his race. Ay, every branch of it. I knew the true Oswald Clarendon before hot-headed Grafton drove the impetuous boy away from home. Even Grafton does not know the family history better than I. That's the past."

"Remember you will lose all hope with Grafton if you try to cheat him and fail."

"I've lost it now, unless I can keep up the deceit. Korgan Murch cannot appear as planned. He is dead, and he will be recognized by somebody and the whole plot come out, if Grafton is allowed to know that his supposed heir was not what I claimed. That will ruin me; the one hope is to find a substitute for Murch."

"In one night? Impossible!"

"I tell you it must be tried! It is all that stands between me and beggary; it is my one hope. I am going to the Bowery to look for a second impostor!"

Barney looked at his companion and shook his head. He saw that Overbridge was greatly excited, and he believed the lawyer had lost his reason under pressure of deep disappointment.

"Levi," he replied, "you had better go home and rest the night out. You need it."

"Come to the Bowery!"

"Not I. You've had my aid in this affair, but the scene has changed. I am a man who lives by my wits, and they never allow me to get ahead of my debts. I am a bold gambler in life's game, but I am not a fool. Help you try your new scheme? Not I, Levi!"

"Then I try it alone."

"Come, come, my good sir, go home and forget this—"

"I will not. I will make the new try."

"Levi, your mind is not just right to-night—"

Again the lawyer seized his companion's arm. He ignored the direct charge as to his mental condition, and steadily directed:

"Go you back to the pier. We were fools not to throw Korgan Murch's body into the river. Go and do it! It would very likely be found anywhere, but it will connect us less positively if not on the pier. Let that be your duty; I will do mine."

Despite the inexorable tone of the speaker, Barney made one more effort. He failed; Levi replied curtly and hastened away from him.

Barney went to the pier. When he arrived it was too late for his plan; the body of Korgan Murch had been found.

CHAPTER III.

A NEW CANDIDATE IS SECURED.

The Bowery had its usual evening life—not the turbulent Bowery of old and of tradition, song and story, but the restless, yet well-ordered thoroughfare of the present decade. Men and women of all nations and varied dress passed along more or less quietly, and the saloons and lodging-houses were alike doing good business.

Two men paused on the western sidewalk and looked up and down a three-storied building. The men were young, but they did not look prosperous. They were not any too clean, and their seedy clothes were beginning to show rags here and there. A grade above the tramp species, the keen observer would easily mark them down as vagabonds. Not of vicious tendencies, as far as the eye could discover, they looked like good-natured indolence fast nearing trampdom.

One was tall, dark and somewhat muscular; the other was slight, short and fair. He of the muscular formation had a serious expression at times, and anon one of mirth, and presently of severity; but the slight member of the pair was never otherwise than amusing, whether he intended to be or not.

The tall man nodded approvingly.

"I guess this will do for us," he remarked.

"The only question," replied the fair-haired wanderer, with a smile and a squeaking voice, "is, will they have fine finger-bowls, electric buttons and an elevator?"

He was unheeded by his companion, who began to count out a few coins from his pockets.

"I'm not sure we have money enough for two beds," he proceeded, counting carefully.

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, don't say that," plaintively remonstrated the sunny-haired man.

"Twenty-three, twenty-four—ah! here's a nickel!—twenty-nine. I only need another penny."

"Find it, Tommy; find it!" eagerly directed the second wanderer, with profound entreaty in his voice. "We want one of those voluptuous fifteen-cent beds, each of us. Find it, Tommy!"

The banker of the pair fished zealously, but the desired penny did not come to light.

"I do believe I've reached the bottom," he remarked. "Guess we shall have to take ten-cent beds."

"What, sink so low as that? Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg! never will do. We shall surely meet very ordinary folks if we do that. Keep up the hunt; there must be one penny more. Can't you find a postage stamp or a beer check? Look all over, for we must have elegant quarters or I can't rest at all."

The voice was sad and plaintive, but the face of the speaker did not get wholly woe-begone. He had a nature that could stand up under severe trials, and he hoped when all seemed dark. Tommy Fogg was not so buoyant, and he was serious enough as he failed to develop the needed coin.

"No use," he finally declared, stopping the search. "I've touched bottom; only twenty-nine cents."

"Gentlemen, are you as hard up as that?"

It was a voice by their side, and they turned quickly. There stood a little old man with a keen, intellectual-looking face, and, as he wore fairly good clothes, a wild hope shot into the tall wanderer's mind. He frankly and tersely replied:

"Dead broke!"

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" remonstrated the fair-haired man. "How can you say that? We have money to burn, sir, but the fire isn't lighted and we haven't any matches."

"Dead broke!" repeated Tommy, as frankly as before.

"Do you want to get rich?"

The question was too much for the sunny-haired man. He wheeled upon the stranger and took him by the hand with a quick motion.

"Show us the chance, my dear sir; show it, and we will do the rest. The circus business is poor, and I can't vault over five cantering horses any more—bareback riding and aerial vaulting is my line, and my name, it is Ai Skinner—but I can vault over four horses easy, if the clinking cash can be corralled directly after."

"And you?" questioned the stranger of Tommy.

"Right on the make! Show us the chance."

"Who and what are you?"

"Commercial travelers—heel-and-toe artists, and go-as-you-can road-inspectors," explained Ai.

"Weary wayfarers," added Tommy. "Gents in hard luck, with many admirable qualities—all such qualities except the delusive cash."

The stranger eyed them closely. He saw a good deal more than the ordinary man would have distinguished, and believed he had found what he wanted. They had not vicious faces, but he did not want that kind. They were down on their luck, and such men were usually ready to improve their financial affairs without too severe devotion to honor—so he reasoned.

"The taller one is something like Korgan Murch," thought he, "and if he is pliable he is a better subject than Korgan. He would do better in decent society than my dead impostor. I will try them. I can shake off the little fellow, and the big one may have been sent to me by fate."

Aloud, he said with considerable warmth:

"Gentlemen, I like to help the worthy who are in need. Come with me to a quiet place where I can talk with you, and I think I can fill your pockets with money

and clothe you with rich suits. Will you go?"

"Is it to break a bank or rob a widow?" asked the tall wanderer.

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" plaintively exclaimed Ai Skinner, "why do you mention such dreadful possibilities? You know we wouldn't indulge in violence to man, woman or animal."

"Right!" declared Fogg. "No violence."

"There shall be none. Nothing but lawful and honorable play for a big fortune. Will you go and listen to me?"

"Yes."

So Lawyer Levi Overbridge and the seedy wanderers passed away from the Bowery and to a side street.

On the following morning there was an unusual stir in a residence on Houston Street. It was a plain, old building and afflicted with the decay of years. Nobody, it seemed, had taken the trouble to paint or brighten up the bricks in many years. They were all in place, and sound and strong from foundation to top, but they had the dingy air of nearly every other house within sight. This was the old Grafton homestead, where the family of that name had lived for many years, one generation after another, and now the home of Nathaniel, the last of his line.

Up to this house came a carriage and stopped near the door. It was nothing strange, for Mr. Grafton was one of the few who kept a rig in that section, but this especial turn-out was a public coach. From the interior emerged Lawyer Levi Overbridge, Tommy Fogg and Ai Skinner.

The last two had undergone a remarkable change since the previous evening. Both were well clad, and the clothes of Mr. Fogg were rich and tasty. Ai's did not show such a degree of expense and good fit, but they were new and neat.

Seen thus, they were clean, well built and rather handsome and stylish—the change from the Bowery rags was remarkable. Good clothes had done wonders for them.

Fogg was rather serious of expression, but Ai fairly bubbled over with good humor, deep interest in all things and eager expectancy.

"So that is the place," he murmured, softly. "Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, look at it, will you? Better even than a fifteen-cent bed, isn't it? I wish we had known this gentleman wanted an heir before, and we wouldn't have gone hungry so many times."

"Silence!" exclaimed the lawyer. "No more such talk. Remember what you are. Above all, don't speak the name of Fogg again. Your friend is now Oswald Clarendon."

"He always was lucky. Such a boy for finding a stray dime when we was in need of food. Tommy, we won't starve no more."

"Be still!" ordered Levi, sharply. "Remember my instructions. You, Skinner, are now a servant, and you must address your friend as 'Mr. Clarendon' and 'sir.' Don't forget. One thing more. Fogg, I forgot to say that a man was killed somehow down on the pier where your vessel lay, last night. If it ever is mentioned—I don't think it will be—you will know nothing about it. Remember how the 'Smiling Sally' sailed away, as narrated by me, and then deny all knowledge of the man who was killed. Understand?"

"Yes."

Tommy Fogg answered seriously. He was a vagabond, and had gone into a hazardous adventure because he was liable to get good out of it, but he did not like to hear that anybody had been killed. That made him shiver. Before he could say more, however, Overbridge walked briskly up to the door.

It was a crisis in Lawyer Levi's life. If he withdrew from his venture he was lost; if he made the venture and failed there was no knowing what calamities would come to him. He had talked almost incessantly to Tommy Fogg to instruct him in his part, but it was a wild hope that he would succeed, and Levi well knew it.

He rang the bell; the door was opened

by a pert-looking woman of some thirty years. Her dress proclaimed her a servant.

"Take these cards to Mr. Grafton," directed Overbridge.

She accepted the cards, but there was a scowl on her face. Ordinarily pleasant and full of humor, she knew enough to resent the coming of these people. She knew those who had thought they were next-of-kin until Levi Overbridge's remarkable finding of Oswald Clarendon, after that young man had been supposed for many years to be dead, and she liked the disappointed heirs as much as she knew them; so she would very gladly have laid violent hands on Levi and his tribe.

She could not do this, but she did escort them to the parlor in a sulky mood and took the cards up-stairs in the same way.

"Sure," she muttered, as she went, "it's a stylish gang, but Providence save me from havin' ter serve them long. The Harpers have engaged Joseph Chester, the headquarters special, to look into the matter for them, an' may the saints help him ter prove that this ain't Oswald Clarendon at all, which I don't believe he is."

The servant, whose name was Maggie, had no reason for her belief, except her private prejudices, but this did not make her any the less strong in her faith. She regarded the persons below as interlopers or impostors, and devoutly hoped they would be proven so.

Overbridge was nervous while they waited, and he added cautions until Tommy Fogg was in the same mood and ready to back out if he had been allowed a chance, but Ai Skinner was quite at ease.

Delighted as a child at the prospect of having a home and money, he fell to admiring the neglected paintings on the wall with exaggerated interest and expression.

Presently Maggie came with her message.

"You's ter come up!" she curtly announced.

Levi started nervously and then rose. The crisis was at hand. Would they succeed in duping Nathaniel Grafton further?

CHAPTER IV.

A STARTLING VISITOR.

Ai Skinner was left alone in the parlor. He heard the footsteps of his companions on the stairs as they went to interview Nathaniel Grafton. Ai was the least worried man of the three schemers. He was so constituted that he saw everything in a promising light, and if he assumed a tone and choice of words akin to lamentation when adversity was especially harsh, it was only the transient grief that one sees in a child.

He had come into the house against Levi Overbridge's wishes. There was no need of Ai, and he seemed to be a serious impediment to the conspiracy, but it had been impossible to get rid of him. Ai and Tommy Fogg were vagabonds and wanderers, but they felt a strong bond of affection for each other; so, when Tommy was called to fill the place left vacant by Korgan Murch, he insisted that his friend should come with him. Ai had come—as Tommy's valet. That was to be his ostensible role, though he knew as little of what a valet should do as was possible.

Alone in the parlor he looked around closely. Grafton, with all his money, had been a penurious man, and that parlor had seen no brightening touch in many years. Furniture and paintings were alike dim and rusty, and Ai saw it when he looked critically.

"Never mind," he murmured with his singularly sunny smile; "Tommy and I will have a change here. We are rich, and we won't spare expense. A few paintings by the old masters will brighten things up a good deal, and we'll have the house refurnished from top to bottom. It can be made to smile like the rose of Sharon. Ha, ha! This is very different from being weary walkers, and better than even riding fiery untamed steeds in

the circus. Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, we have struck it rich. I am anxious to see Nathaniel."

The last-named desire was just what both Levi and Tommy were anxious to prevent. Ai had intelligence of a certain strange sort, but he was as artless and destitute of cunning as a child, and they dreaded to have Grafton meet him at all, and hoped to keep him out of the way.

"Let me see," he continued, remembering Levi's oft-repeated cautions. "Our history is this: We have been miners in the Rockies, cowboys in the Territories, soldiers in Chili and sailors on the high seas—that is, Tommy—I mean Captain Clarendon—has, and I have been his valet. I saved his life in Mexico when the Greasers would have shot him—bless me, how is a man to remember all this? I must get a map and look up all these places. I know Mexico is in Chili, and the Rocky Mountains are in the United States, but is Chili in Colorado or Texas? I must get a map."

Occupying his time thus, and conscientiously trying to learn his lesson well, Ai awaited the return of his companions.

They came at last, and there was a satisfied expression on the old lawyer's face. As he had hoped, Grafton's dim vision had prevented him from seeing that the face of Tommy Fogg was not that of Korgan Murch, and the enfeebled mind of the old man had done the rest. He had received the impostor without a suspicion that he was being doubly imposed upon.

Overbridge was to go away, now. He would gladly have remained to help keep up the cheat on Grafton, but it was out of the question, and he had to leave the false heir and trust to Tommy's shrewdness and to luck. He believed Fogg was capable of doing his part well; the worst danger lay in Ai's blundering tongue, and Tommy had strict injunctions to keep the ex-circus man away from Nathaniel.

The lawyer took his departure, and the young men had full possession of the parlor. Maggie, the servant, was putting the finishing touches to their rooms, however—Ai had not been expected—and she soon came with the report that they were ready for occupancy.

The deceivers went up-stairs and made themselves at ease. Both sat down in the supposed heir's room, and smoked good cigars with relish. Ai bubbled over with exultation.

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, isn't this just glorious!" he murmured. "We have fallen into clover and apple blossoms, and the fields are gay and odorous. Isn't it jolly?"

"Now, see here!" exclaimed Fogg. "You are not to call me Tommy any more. Call me Captain Clarendon."

"I forgot that."

"Don't forget again."

"I won't, dear boy, I won't!"

It was a ready promise, but Ai did forget inside of five minutes, and Fogg grew uneasy over the prospect. Ai had no more skill than a child, and there was no knowing what his folly would do for them.

They enjoyed their comfortable quarters for a couple of hours with keen relish, but Ai suggested that they ought not to be too formal, and Tommy agreed with him. Grafton was in too poor health to entertain his new heir all the while, and he had told him to make himself at home in the house. Fogg decided to do this, instead of keeping close to his room, so, at Ai's suggestion, both went to the parlor again.

It did not occur to either that this was an unusual place for a valet to spend his time.

They were lounging about that room for the next half hour. Then the door-bell rang, but they did not suppose it meant anything to them until Maggie appeared at the door of the parlor.

"Somebody to see you," she curtly announced, and then stepped back and disappeared with as little ceremony as she had before used.

A gentleman walked into the room. Tommy Fogg was almost face to face

with him, while, by good luck, Ai was well back and out of consideration for awhile. Fogg wished he, too, had been wholly invisible. From the start he felt afraid of the new-comer.

He was not over thirty years of age, but he had a keenness of expression, alertness of manner and general air of business that worried Tommy before a word was said.

His air was very polite, however, as he bowed and inquired:

"Captain Clarendon?"

There seemed to be a lump in Tommy's throat, and he swallowed in an effort to get rid of it. Then he made answer:

"That's my name, sir."

"Late master of the schooner 'Smiling Sally'?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am a detective, and I have come to see about the man who was murdered near your vessel, last night!"

Absolute fright fell upon Tommy Fogg. The words were bad enough, but this alert young man had an air that was worse. And he was a detective! Tommy was filled with sudden terror, and he saw visions of himself being dragged to prison and put in a cell under charge of crimes which would send him to the electric chair.

"You h-h-have?" he stammered.

"Yes. I dare say you know of this murder?"

Fogg recalled the warning of Levi Overbridge. He had treated it with considerable lightness at the time, for he had not supposed anything would come of it, but he now saw that his hope was delusive. Remembering Levi's directions, he tried to seem at ease as he replied:

"I have not heard of it."

"It is true that such a deed was done. At what hour did the 'Smiling Sally' sail?"

"About twelve, I think," replied Fogg, at a venture.

"Were you on board until she went?"

"Yes."

"Why did she go last night?"

On this point Tommy had his answer all prepared by Levi Overbridge, and he was quick of speech.

"I had sold the vessel."

"You were her former owner, then?"

"Oh! yes."

"Why did you sell?"

"I had no further use for her."

"A good reason surely. The life of a sailor is one of peril, but there must also be much of pleasure in it. Were you long a sailor?"

The room seemed to have grown suddenly over-warm to Fogg. What did this man, who announced himself a detective, mean by questioning him so persistently about his career as a sailor? Tommy wished he was back in the Bowery, occupying a ten-cent bed and free from care and danger. Not being there, he made an effort to remain calm.

"I sailed about three years."

"You have had quite an adventurous career, I understand."

"Slightly."

"What became of the 'Smiling Sally' when she sailed?"

"I don't know exactly. I sold her to men who said they were going to use her in the lumber trade, and I dare say she is well on her way to Maine now. What port she made for I don't know."

"You say you didn't see the dead man?"

"I did not."

"Singular! The body was found at a little after eleven, and you say the schooner did not sail until twelve."

"I can't say just when she did sail. I had left her long before that, you see."

Tommy smiled amiably, thinking he had made a lucky statement, but he was doomed to disappointment.

"You told me a moment ago you were on board until she sailed."

The impostor gave up all hope. His visitor was a detective, and it was plain, he thought, that the whole matter had been discovered. The truth was out, and he would have to suffer for his false claim. It was the desperation of lost hope that led him to make a surprising

rally. He waved his hand, as if to dispose of a trivial point, and coolly answered:

"My words were to be taken in a general sense only. By saying that I remained on board until she sailed, I did not mean that I saw her go. I did not see the going, nor do I know when she sailed. I suppose I left the schooner at about a quarter to eleven, or may be half-past ten. When she got away I can't say. I inferred that they would go about twelve, but they may have departed much earlier. If they made haste they could have gone well before eleven."

"That settles that point," calmly replied the detective. "Now, as to the dead man. He lay on the pier not many yards from where the 'Smiling Sally' was when in her dock. Can you say who he was?"

"I have no idea."

"Was he one of the crew, do you think?"

"No," responded Fogg, with happy quickness of wit. "If he had been, the crew would have remained and reported the affair."

"They were law-abiding men, then?"

"Yes."

"The stranger was murdered—struck down with a knife. The blade pierced his heart and caused almost instant death. Why was he on the pier at that hour, if he had no connection with the schooner? When she went there was nothing to call him there. He was not a tramp, but was well dressed in a seafarer's suit. Who was he?"

The impostor wished he knew himself. Levi had known of it. Why had not the lawyer told more? Why had he been left to face murder and a detective alone?

"I shall be glad to have you explain this," added the detective.

CHAPTER V.

DANGER ON ALL SIDES.

The substitute was not weak of mind, and was wise enough now to understand that the less he said the better it would be for him. He had already made one bad break by careless speech; it would not do to make another. It was a relief to think that he could find shelter in the shadow of ignorance, and therefore was quite firm as he responded:

"I would gladly tell all you wish if I knew. Unfortunately, I know nothing about it. I cannot believe that the man was any one I ever saw—"

"The South Street loungers assure me that he was seen around the pier during the time the 'Smiling Sally' lay there."

"Many men were around the pier during that time, sir."

"Anyhow, I trust you will go and see if you can identify him."

"I will if you wish, gladly."

Tommy thought it best to add that word, but he did not do it with unction. He did not want to see the murdered man, nor to have anything to do with the case, but he realized that he could not have his own way. His fear that he was suspected of killing the man affected him almost to terror, but that made it all the more essential for him to dissemble, and to seem personally unconcerned.

"Can you be ready half an hour later?"

"I think so."

"I will call for you then, captain."

"Very well."

The detective rose. He had been calm and business-like all through the interview, and, really, there was nothing to tell whether he suspected Tommy Fogg of anything wrong or not.

He took his departure from the room in a matter-of-fact way, and closed the door of the parlor behind him as he went out. In the vestibule Maggie, the servant, was busy cleaning the paint. She stopped short at sight of the departing visitor.

"Oh, Mr. Chester, I want to speak with you," she exclaimed.

"You do?"

"Yes; it's about your case, you know."

She was eager, but he did not know her, and was duly discreet.

"What case?" he inquired.

"Oh, about the heir. It was me that told the Harpers you was coming, and

then they told me they would hire you. 'He's an awful smart man,' they said, an' I told them to go ahead an' do it. You know, they h.ve thought for many a day they was to heir Nathaniel Grafton's money, an' I am their friend, an' interested in it, too. They are awful nice people—they are just splendid!"

Maggie paused for breath, and Chester replied:

"Are you sure you are on the right track?"

"I know you are a detective. It was me who told the Harpers that another heir had been found. They said they would hire Joseph Chester, the headquarters special, to investigate and see if the new heir's claim was true. Oh, Mr. Chester, I don't believe it is true!"

The girl was too much excited to be fully coherent, but the special was quite impassive.

"I did not know you were the one who gave information to the Harpers. Well, I will confess that I am hired by them to investigate the sudden entry of a new heir there."

"He is a deceiver."

"Why do you think so?"

"I can tell it by intuition. He is no more Oswald Clarendon than I am. It is all a plot of that lawyer, Levi Overbridge, to defraud the Harpers of their just dues. I just know it!"

"My girl, maybe you can be of assistance in this, if you are prudent and wish to help your friends. Keep your eyes and ears open."

"Sure, and I will."

The special went on his way, while Maggie looked after him in wrapt admiration.

"Sure, that's the man that will unravel this mystery, if there is one. They do be sayin' that Joseph Chester is the n'estest detective in all New York. That's why they call him the Expert an' the Special. I'll just be ready to kiss him if he fires out this passel o' cheap heirs that has come. Sure, there's somethin' crooked somewhere, an' I know it. I don't take no stock in Levi Overbridge, nor in these trash that he's brought. Faugh!"

The servant elevated her nose scornfully, and, forgetting her imaginary task of cleaning paint, retreated into the house.

While Joseph Chester, going off down the block, was thinking:

"This girl, with her strong prejudices, may prove of great value if she is as shrewd as she looks. Follow up the case? Ah! they little know how strong a motive I have in doing so! This time I am not merely the paid detective; it is a personal matter, and my every power shall be enlisted. It is as much to me as to those who engaged me, and it shall not flag. Who killed the man found on the pier? Who was he? What was back of his death? I am sure he had close association with the people on the 'Smiling Sally.' What was that connection? Did one of them murder him?"

Chester had left the impostor much relieved by his departure, for a respite was better than nothing. During the interview he had forgotten Ai Skinner, but, remembering him now, he looked around to find him. Ai's head was just visible above the top of a chair.

"Is—is he gone?" quavered the excrucious man.

"Yes. Come out. What have you heard?" asked the substitute.

"Heard? Oh, Tommy, Tommy Fogg, we shall be killed, arrested, suspected! The gallows stares us in the neck—I mean in the face. I heard it all. Somebody is murdered, and we are believed to have killed him. Detectives are on our track—the very air is full of evil omen. Let us fly—fly! Pack my grip—I am too weak—and we will haste us to the fields of Jersey!"

Ai wrung his hands, and was quite as scared as his words indicated. He had been in the shadow when the headquarters' detail came in, and, having kept quiet long enough to catch the drift of the conversation, he had made due care to keep invisible. Crouched behind the chair, he had hardly dared to breathe while the interview was in progress.

Now Fogg seized him by the arm roughly.

"Ai, do you see where we are?" he demanded.

"On the way to the gibbet!"

"That accursed detective suspects us of murder."

"Yes—ye—es; I know it. Oh! let us fly! let us fly, Tommy!"

"No! We must stay here. It is our one hope. We are suspected. Flight would brand us guilty, and we could not flee fast enough to escape the fiends of law. Before we had gone fifty miles the wires would be hot with telegrams ordering those by the way to hunt us down."

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!"

"The guilty man flees; the innocent one remains to face the danger. I have been a vagabond, a slothful fool and a never-do-well, but there is no crime that can truthfully be brought against me, except this fool job of impersonating Oswald Clarendon. A pretty fix we got into when we agreed to this scheme, didn't we? It may hang us—send us to the electric chair!"

"Let us fly, Tommy!"

"I tell you that would be fatal. Suspicion would then have us sure, and we should brand ourselves with guilt. We must stay; we must fight it out!"

"Oh! I am so sick, so sick!"

Ai dropped into a chair and doubled up with real or imaginary pains. Lacking the firmness of his friend, he saw no hope in the future. The profound satisfaction he had felt in their new situation was gone. He had watched Joseph Chester while the detective was present, and was willing to swear that the special looked upon Fogg with suspicion. Now that his ally presented the consequences of flight so clearly, and he saw that they must remain to meet the peril, he was simply overwhelmed.

Tommy paced the room nervously. He had said well when he declared that neither he nor Ai was a law-breaker, but, if they had been no worse than vagabonds in the past, they were now in trouble.

Presently he paused in his walk.

"All is not yet lost," he added. "If we brace up and don't let that confounded detective scare us, how can he prove that we killed the man on the pier?"

"I don't know how, but he will do it."

"I am not so sure of that. We have Levi Overbridge to help us; he would not dare do otherwise if he wanted to. Brace up, Ai; all is not lost. We will just stay right here and fight it out. We will continue to pose as Oswald Clarendon and valet, and who is to prove us otherwise, or prove that we killed the man on the pier?"

Ai brightened up quickly. Really, there was a possibility that there might be a dozen ways to get them into the net, but hope caught at the straw and they tried to believe they were going to escape serious trouble.

Continued conversation enlivened the spirits of both, and by the time that Joseph Chester called for Tommy, they were fairly cheerful, though Ai's confidence weakened when he saw his ally depart.

"It is my last look at him," he thought, dismally. "He will be arrested, and then I shall get the same dose. I wonder if it hurts much to be killed in an electric chair? I wish I knew somebody who had been killed that way, so I could ask about it. But, anyhow, our days of innocent ease are over. No more the gentle tramping along the dusty roads; no more the grassy bed at night; no more the farmer's dog and wife! Oh, how sad it is to think of vanished joys!"

Despite Ai's mournful forebodings, Tommy Fogg returned alive and free from custody. He had seen the body of the man murdered on the pier, but nothing had come of it, unless, as he tried to believe, his own conduct on that occasion had impressed Joseph Chester favorably.

The adventures of the day were over. Tommy spent as much time in the company of his host as possible, and when Mr. Grafton weakened and tired, he went to Ai.

Grafton had not heard anything about

the reputed Captain Clarendon having a valet until that morning, but it had been told that the man was too much attached to Clarendon to leave him, so he had willingly accepted him as a member of the household.

More, he wanted to see Ai, but as both Tommy and Levi knew that Ai was not world-wise enough to meet the master of the house with safety to their plans, this was postponed for the time by skillful excuses, and the postponement was to be kept up as long as possible.

At night it was hard to make Ai consent to occupy another room than that with Tommy, but the point was carried at last. They retired to separate chambers, and the night began.

The Grafton house was still and dark.

CHAPTER VI.

LAWLESS INTRUDERS.

Tommy Fogg found it less easy than usual to fall into sound slumber with so much on his mind, but he succeeded at last, and was allowed peaceful rest for several hours, but the awakening was violent. He came to a sitting position with sounds of some sore of disturbance rising not far away.

Accustomed to lodging-house broils, he was about to take it calmly, when he suddenly remembered he was in a very different place.

"Say, there's a racket in the old gentleman's room!" he exclaimed.

The room in question was that next to him, and all sounds drifted to him readily. There was a thumping of something or other, as if chairs were being knocked around freely, and he knew that was not in the natural course of events.

He thought, too, that there were muffled cries of distress.

"Burglars, or worse! This must be looked to at once!"

Tommy was not a coward, and he leaped out of bed and made for the door, drawing on his trousers as he went. He entered the hall and found all dark there, but he did not let that check him, nor the fact that he found Grafton's door closed.

He tried the door; he found it unlocked; he flung it open.

Light was before him; he rushed in. A remarkable scene was revealed before him.

Mr. Grafton was in bed, crouching among the covers, but everything went to show that he had recently been out of that place. He was not alone. Two other persons were present, and one of them was just turning up the gas as Tommy entered. A broken bull's-eye lantern on the floor showed that another kind of light had been used previously. Naturally it had been faint, and, when the smashing of it cut it off wholly, the persons in charge had resorted to the gas, but, influenced by Tommy's entrance, perhaps, even now the light was not made bright.

There was enough to answer his purpose, however, and he made good use of his eyes.

Those present besides Mr. Grafton were total strangers to Tommy. He saw two tall, bony persons in male attire, and garments, too, that needed both patches and soap. Very much like tramps their wearers appeared, but they were of a novel kind. In their swarthy faces and dusky skins Tommy recognized a species of people he had seen oftener on the road than elsewhere.

"Gypsies!" he thought, at once.

He was not the only one who looked, and the gaze of the dusky pair betrayed both surprise and hostility. Whatever errand had brought them there, they were surprised at it, and they were dangerous intruders to meddle with, if looks went for anything.

On the table in the center of the room was a club of some black wood, and not unlike a policeman's billy. The eyes of one of the pair strayed to this club, and he moved forward, but Tommy was ahead of him. With a light spring the impostor secured the implement.

This did not check his rival, and he swung it up almost in the swarthy man's face.

"Keep off!" he ordered.

He might as well not have spoken. The small, keen eyes of his opponent were glittering with resolution, and, even as the warning was sounded, he made a forward leap. Tommy read desperate purpose there, and he did not hesitate as to his own course. He swung the club down, and it cracked lustily on the assailant's head. He reeled back from the blow.

"So that's your game, my laddy!" exclaimed the second swarthy intruder. "We will see about that. Match this if you can!"

A revolver was exhibited, and as the hammer went up with the ominous double click, Tommy surely expected to die then and there. But the voice of the man he had clubbed rose quickly, uttering some command in a language other than English. Then he added more intelligibly:

"There is but one. Do not proceed to desperate measures; we can manage them!"

He slipped toward the door as he spoke, and Tommy found himself shut in with the pair, each holding a revolver. The case had a dangerous look, but Tommy was not a coward.

"See here," he exclaimed, "what is going on here?"

"Man," responded the man who had been clubbed, quickly, "there will be a killing unless you are wise. Save your life yourself, or it will not be saved. Utter one cry, and you are dead."

"So that is what you are?"

"We are here; we shall go away victorious. Man, shall we leave you dead or alive? Take your pick."

Tommy's eyes strayed to Nathaniel Grafton. The old man was still huddled in his bed-covers, and his air was that of one frightened too much to be a factor in the drama. Plainly, no help was to be expected from him, so Tommy again turned to his swarthy companions. They had him surrounded, and each held a revolver. He could call for help, but, before it could come, they would have time to kill him. That they had the will to do this he felt sure.

"You are burglars," he remarked, slowly.

"Call us what you please."

"Better leave here and go back to the tents of your people."

"What know you of our people?" was the sharp question.

"Go to your wagons, horses, fancy baskets, and long journeys."

"Man, you know too much."

"I know you are gypsies; I know no more. I read that in your dusky faces and general appearance. Nobody ever accused a gypsy of being too honest, but they are not burglars, as a rule. I never knew one who was."

"Put them out!" suddenly cried Mr. Grafton. "They are robbers; they have maltreated me. Put them out! Have them arrested!"

"Ha! What have we here?"

The second gypsy abruptly started at the sound of Nathaniel's voice, and advanced toward the bed. An intent gaze was fixed upon the miserable old man. The latter shrank away, and seemed to see no more than physical danger, but the keen regard suddenly brought something to the looker. The gypsy wheeled upon the man who had been hit with the club. One bony arm was pointed toward Grafton, and with sudden shrillness of tone the swarthy speaker added:

"It is John Hughes—John Hughes!"

The words conveyed nothing to Tommy Fogg, but it was different with Grafton. He stirred into new life, but not with pleasure. His dimmed mental faculties revived, and he looked like another man, but a badly frightened one. If the gypsy's scrutiny had been close, his became quite as much so.

"Wh—wh—what?" he stammered.

"John Hughes, here!"

"It cannot be," protested the second gypsy.

"I say it is," was the sharp response. "Look! He knows me, too. Ay, and look you, John Hughes. I am Gormora Lee, and this is my brother Gideon. Ha, ha!

You are almost back in the gypsy camp, and without seeking the wilds of the North."

Much of this was wholly unintelligible to Tommy Fogg, but other parts were plain enough. First of all, he knew his suspicions as to the gypsy blood of the intruders was correct; next, he knew what he had suspected from the start, that the less active burglar was a woman—the name Gormora showed that, and her male attire was a useless mask now.

Why should the progress of events thus affect Nathaniel Grafton? That was a mystery, but he cowered in bed, looking more miserable than ever, but the light did not leave his eyes. He gazed at Gormora with deep meaning and alarm.

He who had been called Gideon Lee—the man who had been clubbed—seemed perplexed and uncertain. He advanced a little and spoke to his sister.

"Surely, you are wrong," he exclaimed. "This wrinkled, decrepit, shivering wretch John Hughes?"

"Remember that twenty years have passed, and that he was of middle age then—ay, as old as we. But gypsy blood does not weaken or gypsy nerves grow palsied. John Hughes it is!"

"The man who came to our camp and—"

The words stirred Gormora to a fury. Her little black eyes flashed with venomous fire, and she handled her revolver excitedly. Bewildered Tommy Fogg would not have been surprised to see her shoot Grafton down then and there.

"The man," added Gideon Lee, with venom but little less than hers, "that we hunted for during ten years!"

"With revolvers loaded to kill!"

"With knives sharpened to razor keenness!"

"With hearts filled with hate and oaths of vengeance on our lips!"

"Found, found!"

"Found, found!" echoed the second of the strange pair.

Tommy Fogg was not the object of their enmity, and, just then, he was glad he was not. Even in his wandering career he had seldom seen so savage and ominous people as this fragment of gypsyism. He shivered as they hissed out their remarkable ejaculations, and unconsciously fell a little back.

"We will kill him now!" added Gormora, harshly.

Grafton uttered an affrighted cry, and Tommy again interfered. The whole matter, with its alleged recognitions, was so unlike an ordinary housebreaking that he did not call for help, as he would ordinarily have done, but he must keep Grafton from being slain.

"No killing here!" he exclaimed, commandingly. "Such a thing might go on the country roads, but not in the city of New York. Keep your hands off, or I will take part in this."

"You are one man," quickly retorted Gideon Lee. "Where are your weapons?"

It was a practical question, but Tommy was equal to it.

"My weapons are the fact that I am in a civilized house, with other people within sound. Let me utter one cry, and other men would rush to the spot. You hold revolvers. Well, if you fire them the help for Grafton will surely come promptly."

Gideon and his sister exchanged glances. It appeared that they were influenced by the argument.

"Put them out!" suddenly requested Nathaniel, shrilly. "They hate me; they will kill me if they can. Put them out at once!"

"Try it, if you dare!" hissed Gormora. "Maybe you want us to tell all about the past? Try it, and we shall tell of the gypsy camp, the stranger who came to us, and—"

"Stop, stop!" feverishly implored Nathaniel.

"I do not think anybody will be called in," added Gideon. "We can settle this alone—we know how, for we have hunted for you for twenty years—ay, hunted all through ten States."

"Isn't there some mistake?" asked Tommy, slowly, thinking of the difference

between the opposing parties. "Isn't it likely you have the wrong man?"

Gormora extended a bony arm and the index finger bore upon Grafton.

"Ask him!" she exclaimed. "Ask him!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE GYPSIES' GRUDGE.

It was Nathaniel's chance for denial, if ever, but he did not improve it. Instead, he sat in bed and stared at the gypsies as if they were monsters about to devour him, an opinion not so very wide of the mark. Something in his manner seemed to stir Gormora up to fresh vindictiveness, and she abruptly advanced upon him, her arms outstretched and her bony fingers spread, an ominous picture.

"Vengeance! vengeance!" she hissed.

The wretched old man uttered a weak cry, and Tommy Fogg moved forward with the club raised.

"Let him alone, or I'll attack you and shout for help."

His ringing tones impressed the hot-blooded woman, and she obeyed in time to avert the collision. Her gaze was turned upon Tommy, her eyes flashing with fury.

"Do you want to go down with him?" she demanded. "I tell you, we will kill him, be it to-night or when it may. Sooner or later it will come. Do you want our enmity, too? Do you want to die with him?"

"I can take care of myself," sturdily retorted Tommy.

Gideon Lee had been thinking, and he now advanced and took Gormora by the arm. Drawing her a few paces away, he whispered in her ears, and his words, inaudible to Tommy, made her leather-like face light up with satisfaction.

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed. "We will do it."

Gideon stepped closer to Grafton. The gypsy had an impressive air which even his old clothes and dirt could not hide, and he put all of his power and intensity into his speech.

"John Hughes, you know us, and we know you now. We little thought when we invaded this house that we should find a familiar face inside its walls, but the hand of fate has led us on. You will not deny our identity; you'll not deny that you know us. If you deny it we shall explain too much, and it will not look well to others. The gypsy camp in the far North; the wanderer for health; the stranger who was given rest, food, care, and the best of the camp, and—you know the rest. Do you want it all told? If you do you have only to make a stand against us. Better not do it! Now, we ask for a return of the hospitality of old. We ask room under your roof."

"What?" ejaculated Tommy.

"We came as robbers; we stay as guests."

"Guests? You, you?"

"Ay!"

"You stay here?"

"Am I not plain? We stay here."

Gideon folded his arms with a stubborn air and stood firm.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Tommy.

"Why?"

"What would people say?"

"What would they say if we were driven out. We should go direct to the police headquarters, and our story would be told. Maybe John Hughes wants that."

"No, no!" cried Grafton. "We do not want any trouble. You can stay."

Tommy heard with amazement. It did not occur to him that this surprising step might interfere with his position as heir in some way—that position was no longer what it had seemed the day before—but the idea of the bony, ill-dressed pair in a rich man's house was remarkable and almost past belief.

"Do you know what you are promising, Mr. Grafton?" he inquired.

"Yes, yes, my boy, I know," answered Nathaniel. "It don't seem just right, but they—they are old friends."

The gypsies were exultant. That fact showed in their deeply-browned faces and in the glances they exchanged. Tommy

had no means of seeing further, and he concluded to relapse into silence. If a fight was to be made against the pair, he, for one, would rather make it by day than in the night, when each carried a revolver. He stepped back as a token that he was out of the argument.

"Where shall we sleep?" inquired Gormora, suddenly.

"There are two vacant rooms on the floor above. You can use them."

"We will do so. Remember, John Hughes, fair play for us must be the order of the day. If you play us false the whole world shall be our audience."

"I will not play you false, and I hope you will be merciful."

"So we will. Depend on us; there shall be no double-dealing while the truce is on."

Wretched Nathaniel Grafton still had the leading desire to be rid of his old foes, and, crouching in bed and looking pitifully degraded, he turned to Tommy.

"Please escort them to their rooms."

"You will excuse me," stiffly replied Tommy. "I am not acquainted with the location of your spare rooms, nor am I a servant. You will have to find other ways of directing them there."

It was a bold position for a new heir, but nobody took offense.

"We can find the rooms," interrupted Gormora. "Leave that to us."

She turned toward the door as easily as if she had been an honored guest, and Gideon followed her. At the threshold the male gypsy turned. His dark, glittering little eyes were fixed upon Grafton.

"Remember, no double-dealing!"

He spoke, and then stalked over the threshold with Gormora in front of him. Their steps sounded in the hall, and then were heard on the upper stairs. Presently the signs of their movements were transferred to the floor above, and it was plain that they were carrying out the plan. Grafton lay down and pulled weakly at the bed-covers. He appeared to be wholly destitute of strength now.

Tommy pitifully assisted in arranging the bed, and then reopened the conversation.

"Mr. Grafton, what do you want me to do about this?"

"About what?" sighed Nathaniel.

"These people. We are now free from their presence. They are robbers by their own confession. Shall I go for the police?"

"No, no; not for the world!" exclaimed the old man.

"Would you have them here?"

"Yes, I must. That is, they are old friends of mine, and I am—ah!—I am glad to see them!"

Tommy surveyed his companion in silence. He understood fully that Grafton held the gypsies in terror, and that he would not dare to oust them, but what was his own duty? He did not believe Grafton would be attacked again, but Gideon and his sister were not agreeable persons to have under the roof. They were there simply because the weak mind of the old man led him to yield instead of fight. What was Tommy's own duty in the case?

The false heir was of several opinions in the next few minutes, but he finally remembered his own precarious position. To go to the police would be to invite investigation, for the Lees were not likely to give up readily. Tommy dared not invite such an investigation—it might be too far-reaching.

He made the decision after a while, and when he saw that Grafton, in spite of his recent scare, was disposed to fall asleep at once, he gave up all thoughts of immediate attention to the subject.

"I will go now, sir," he remarked.

"Kindly do so," replied Nathaniel, rousing. "I will see you in the morning. This disturbance is out of the ordinary run, but it is nothing to call for unusual thought. I say so, and I am master here—I am a Grafton!"

"Certainly, sir. It is all right, if you say so."

"Quite correct, quite correct. Good-night, Oswald!"

The impostor went back to his room. His chief thought was of the old man and his lamentable weakness, but there were other things.

"I dread what will follow," he muttered. "This house will be turned into a bear-garden if those swarthy wanderers stay here. Investigation will ensue, and then—would that I was back in the Bowery, a free and ragged beggar. I was a fool ever to yield to Levi Overbridge's seductions, and I am in deep waters now. I would flee from the house this very night, but that accursed detective has his eagle eye on me. Thinks I ought to know who killed the man on the pier, does he? He thinks more than that, and if I run away it will seem to him to prove that I murdered the unknown. I dare not flee; I must stay and face my destiny. Fool, fool that I was to enter into this dishonorable deceit!"

His opinion on the subject was not wholly influenced by the difficulties that had risen. He had never been a law-breaker, nor guilty of meanness. Lack of ambition, and, it must be confessed, the companionship of Ai Skinner, who was even less ambitious, had made him a semi-tramp, but in their good-natured wanderings they had kept free from all crime.

When approached by Levi Overbridge they had yielded hastily, and Tommy was now aware that they had made a serious and dangerous mistake. He hated himself for having yielded, and would have retreated at once from his dilemma had it not been for the fear of being branded as the murderer of the man found dead on the pier.

Uneasy lay the head of the impostor the remainder of the night, and little sleep came to his relief.

Not caring to be the one to explain the presence of the gypsies, he took care to be late at breakfast the next morning, and Ai was knocking at his door before he was up. The ex-circus man was admitted, and the story was told to him in full. It brought dismay to him.

"Oh, Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" he lamented. "We are getting from bad to worse. These awful people will be the death of us. I know it!"

CHAPTER VIII.

GIDEON'S MISSION OF VENGEANCE.

Somewhat later the two friends went down-stairs. Tommy was to have breakfast, and Ai was to wait until the second table—a plan that did not suit him, but he had been made to understand that a valet could not eat with his master, and that settled it. Tommy walked into the dining-room and Ai lingered in the hall.

Nathaniel Grafton was at the head of the table, and looking much better, physically, than was to be expected. On either side of him was a gypsy. They had undergone no change, except that Gormora had donned the proper garments of her sex. After events proved that she had had them on, under her male attire, when they broke into the house.

Both were as unclean and slovenly of dress as ever, and a more remarkable pair had never sat at table under that roof. Chairs, it seemed, had not been their accustomed lot in the past, and they sat as upright as if they had turned into statues. Still, they were at ease, and possessed good appetites.

Maggie, the servant, was at one side of the room, amazed and full of righteous indignation. She was not an aristocrat, but she did keep clean, and the gypsies were too much for her taste. She had hated Tommy and Ai, but they were clean—she had not seen them on the Bowery—and she looked upon them now with more intolerance. What would they do about the matter?

Tommy went to his seat without sign of surprise or rebellion, but Ai was more promising. He used the door to good advantage, and as he saw for himself what manner of remarkably strange beings had come under the roof, his eyes and mouth both opened wide. He stared as if some strange sort of animals were before him, and, as his expressive face told

it all, Maggie began to feel less hostile toward him.

It was a very silent meal. Now and then Mr. Grafton ventured a remark to Tommy, which was duly answered, but they had the conversation to themselves. Grafton's other guests simply ate and attended to business strictly. They shoveled in their food in haste, and would have finished long before the others had not they eaten more.

"Swine, mere swine!" muttered Maggie in disgust.

As soon as she had a little leisure she proceeded to interview Ai.

"Who are they?" she demanded. "When did they come? Where did they come from?"

"My dear miss," replied the ex-circus man, with a polite air, "I am not prepared to inform you. I never saw them before."

"Are they not companions of yours?"

"I can't say positively until they have washed, but, just now, I can swear I don't know them from Adam. I never was acquainted with Adam, either."

"When did they come?"

"Really, I don't know. Didn't you let them in? I didn't."

"Nor I. I don't understand it. They were here this morning, and a great scare they gave me, but Mr. Grafton said they were his guests and would breakfast with us. Oh! the shame of it!"

"It will just about kill Tommy Fogg, he's so high-toned."

"Tommy Fogg? Who's he?"

"And then," added Ai, suddenly remembering that he had made a bad break, "there is the fact that the house has been so eminent in the past. Only the very best of blue blood, and lots of it. They do not seem just the right sort to sit at that table; but, of course, you know best."

"I do know that much, but I don't understand how they came in. I never saw them before, nor any other guest that was at all under suspicion. Maybe they are here only for breakfast—though I can't imagine how they got in."

Maggie tried to console herself with the hope that they were transient inmates of the house, but she was doomed to disappointment. After the breakfast was eaten the gypsies went with Mr. Grafton to the parlor, and Tommy Fogg ascended to his private room. Ai and Maggie had breakfast in company, and the girl began to warm to the handsome young man who waited on her so politely. After all, he and his master might not be rascals, she thought.

A fresh shock was in store for her. Soon after she went to the upper floor on some errand, and directly after she came flying down. Luck led her to meet Tommy as he stepped out of his own room for a moment. Maggie sounded a wild cry.

"Oh! what do you think?" she gasped.

"What is it, my good woman?" asked Tommy, solicitously.

"Oh! somebody slept up-stairs, and it must have been them niggery-lookin' wretches. Such a place! You should see it!"

"What's the trouble?"

"I do believe they went to bed with their clothes and boots all on. Such a place! Why, they have made two rooms a perfect pig-pen!"

"Well, that surely is not pleasant for a careful housewife to see."

"They was here all night, though how they got in I don't know—it must have been Mr. Grafton who did it. Who are they? What are they?"

"They are no acquaintances of mine."

"The like of them! What are they? Is it Italian blood? They are dark enough, though I don't just recognize the breed in them. Mister, will you tell me what they are?" and Maggie grew really pathetic.

"Sorry, but you will have to go to your master—that is, if you think it best. They are his guests, are they not?"

"Yes, and I dare not go to him. He wouldn't allow me to interfere. But what has he brought in? What will he bring next? Oh, captain," added the girl, with an air not in keeping with her late hos-

tility to Tommy, "won't you just do something to get them—cattle!—out of here?"

"Very likely their stay will be short; but, anyhow, I cannot meddle. Hope for the best. There may soon be a change."

There was one. Shortly after this conversation the male gypsy left the house and walked off down the street. There was nothing hopeful in this, for Gormora remained, but it was the beginning of a change. After an hour he came back, but not alone.

Tommy Fogg happened to be on the lower floor when the bell rang. The female gypsy was in the parlor, and on the watch. She ran to the door and opened it, and then in came Gideon Lee and a second person. Tommy met them almost face to face, and he stood dumfounded when he saw Gideon's companion.

It was a young woman, and one as remarkable in her way as either Gideon or Gormora. She was of medium height and magnificently formed, with a profusion of rich, ebon black hair, and lashes that hung over her cheeks, when the lids were lowered, like a dark veil. It was a handsome face, too, with finely-proportioned features and faultless curves. Her skin was dark—so dark that her own gypsy blood was proclaimed—with a lake of red in each cheek. Unlike her elders, she was neither ragged, dirty nor slovenly. On the contrary, she was neat, clean, and in her way well clad. That way was one of gaudy show, and over the black of her dress and the black of her hair was a profusion of yellow and red, mingled in divers flimsy sashes and the like.

Tommy Fogg looked and could do no more.

This apparition of bounding life and animation looked up at him, too, and a smile promptly moved her face. Strong, white teeth came into view, and an artist would have delighted in the picture.

A brief, satisfied smile was shown by Gormora also. She nodded to Tommy and explained:

"My granddaughter!"

The dark beauty moved quickly forward and took Tommy's hand. She smiled upon him anew, and her voice was strangely musical as she said:

"My name is Zarah Lee. I shall like you, I know."

"Thank you," he replied, somewhat embarrassed.

"I'm to stay here, you know."

"Oh! I didn't know it."

"Yes, all of us. Won't it be grand? I shall have plenty of money, and, ha! don't you think I can't spend it?"

She clapped her hands in high spirits, and it occurred to Tommy that if Gideon Lee was allowed to bring many more of his tribe under the roof there would be but little left for Nathaniel Grafton's heir to secure, later on.

"Zarah, you talk too much!" harshly reminded Gormora.

The girl promptly slapped her grandmother on the cheek in playful fashion.

"Keep still," she suggested, "and nobody will suspect you are in your dotage. Leave the talking to me!"

It was not an ill-natured retort, but rather fascinating to Tommy, and he began to think it would not be such a bad thing to have beautiful Zarah under the roof, after all.

She would have satisfied a sudden interest in the furnishings of the adjacent rooms, but Gormora interfered and insisted upon taking her up-stairs. She obeyed this command, but turned at the head of the flight and threw a kiss back at Tommy.

Gideon Lee scowled as he saw the performance.

"She is only a child," he explained, severely. "See that you use her not ill."

"I have no intention of using anybody ill," stiffly replied Tommy.

The gypsy threw open the shabby coat that covered his breast and revealed a knife, bright and ready.

"This," he added, "for those who misuse the wandering people!"

"Keep yourself in check!" retorted Tommy, with courage that surprised himself.

"I do not fear you or your knife. On the

other hand, the handsome gypsy maid is nothing to me."

"You do not know her yet. She is more beautiful than any princess of foreign lands, and I have seen them all. She is dear to her wandering people, and the man who makes her unhappy dies by the gypsy's knife."

"My good sir, I am not in this game at all. You and I are under the same roof, but we came here in different ways."

"You sneer at me because I turned burglar—"

"Wrong! I was not thinking of that."

"But it was fate that led me to the step. I came to New York on another business, and only made that violent entrance because we all were sorely in need of money. We needed it to carry on a mission of vengeance."

Tommy moved back a pace. He was not a coward, but all this talk about the use of knives, and kindred subjects, was beginning to grow unpleasant.

Gideon Lee had become interested, and his lean form was drawn to its full height as he somberly proceeded.

"I seek quarrel with no man, but this was a righteous cause. I came to kill a man. His name was Korgan Murch!"

The listener started. From Levi Overbridge he had learned the name of the man he had succeeded as "heir" to Grafton's money. Now, he grew worried. What if Gideon Lee should in some way mix him with Korgan Murch? Must he shoulder Korgan's sins too? Must he become heir to his feuds and dangers?

"I still seek him," Gideon added. "I will find him, and then—Ah! well, my knife is sharpened for him. I shall use it!"

CHAPTER IX.

CRAPS MULLIGAN TESTIFIES.

The headquarters special had not abandoned his attempt to make discoveries, and he was busy according to his opportunities. He was not connected with the regular metropolitan force, but, as a private worker in the same cause, he had won the good opinion and admiration of the regular force, and was considered a very keen expert.

His entrance to the Grafton case was due to the fact that he had been engaged by a family named Harper, the supposed next-of-kin to Mr. Grafton, until Levi Overbridge's activity had placed another candidate in the field. Since then Joseph had been busy, and if he had not made marked advances, it was not his fault.

On the next night he went again to the vicinity of South Street and the pier where the, to him, unknown man had died. Other officers were on the case, but they knew less than Joseph, and he confided in none of them, so he was playing a lone hand. Thus far he had found nobody who could give him any light as to what had happened on the pier, but this evening's trip had been taken because he hoped that the regular loungers of the night would again be out, the same men who had been there the evening before.

He went to where the "Smiling Sally" had been, and he walked the street along in the vicinity. He found men who had seen the schooner, but none that could give him light.

After a period of useless endeavor his confidence in his ability to make any discoveries there waned. He walked out on the pier. It was a place of strong interest. Yonder the "Smiling Sally" had rested; here, the unknown man had fallen under the assassin's knife. All around was the mystery, so to speak, and though he had been met with assertions of ignorance by all concerned in the schooner—Overbridge and the so-called Captain Clarendon—he was not convinced.

"Somehow or other," he mused, "there was connection between that dead man and the vessel."

A footstep sounded on the pier behind him. Joseph turned quickly. One man had died there; perhaps the spot was not safe for him. Wheeling, he saw a figure near him.

There was light enough to make the view distinct, and he was impressed by

what he saw and did not see. The newcomer was stout and rough of appearance, but his face and head were nearly hidden by bandages that covered him above the neck like a veil. So might a hospital patient have looked.

"So ther old tub is gone!" muttered this swathed-up apparition.

"What old tub?" asked Joseph.

"The Sneezin' Sadie."

"Do you mean the 'Smiling Sally'?"

"Some such name. It was the old schooner that laid here in the dock."

"She is gone, surely."

"Seen the duffer that was salted?"

"I don't know whom you mean."

"Why, the feller who was laid out fer keeps on th's pier. Or did he get on his alligator skins again?"

"Do you mean the man who was killed?"

"So he was done up, was he? I expected it. Says I ter myself when I see the blow. 'Craps Milligan'—that's me—that is a killer fer sure!"

"You were lucky to see it," replied Joseph, with growing interest. "What was the crime like?"

"See that pier timber over there?"

"Yes."

"I was roostin' over there. I see two men come out o' the schooner. One o' them walked off toward the saloon yonder—guess he was after another schooner—ha, ha!—while the other stayed on the pier. That wasn't nawthin', an, I jest kep' my place. I wasn't thinkin' o' the gent, an' I didn't pay no particular attention, but pretty soon another feller passed down the pier from 'de street. See?"

"Was it the one who went to the saloon?"

"That's the question—was it? I don't know. I kinder looked without suspectin' I was special interested, but all of a sudden I see the feller from the street throw up his arm—like that!" and Craps illustrated.

"Well? And then?"

"The light wasn't so strong as it is now, but I hev' me peeps, an' I seen at once that he held a knife. Down went the weapon, an' I'll swear it hit the mark. He then ketched the victim an' sorter lowered him ter the pier."

"Was there a struggle?"

"Maybe there was some ruction, but not much. The one who used the carver knew his biz."

"Go on!"

"I ain't no parlor chicken, an' I've lived around South Street too long ter be upset by a muss. Ginerally when there is sech a thing on I allows they kin fight it out, but this time one feller hadn't give the other no show. It wasn't noways fair, an' I jest h'isted off my perch sudden an' run along ter take a hand in it all. That was a costly job fer me—see these sheets!" and Craps pointed to his bandages.

"You met him, then?"

"I chased him. He was jest slidin' away from the pier like an eel, so soft and speedy did he go, but I after him. He made the next pier before I come up with him, but I wasn't ter be shook off o' the trail. I come up with a rush, and jest 'lighted on his back."

"And then?"

"We fought all over the brewery. I had not give him no chance ter explain, an' he didn't ask fer none. We was at each other like prize dogs, an' the way we did have it was a caution. Oh! it was a beautiful scrap—ter everybody concerned but me!"

"So you got the worst of it?"

"See these circus tents on my head? Got the worst of it? Say, on the dead quiet, he hammered me silly. I thought I could hold my own with anybody on South Street, but when that stranger got through with me I wasn't fit fer nothin' but Philadelphia scrapple."

"And then he escaped?"

"Well, sometime along then, or thereabouts. I didn't let up as long as I had my thinks, but jest knocked me senseless, an' then he had a picnic. When I come ter my senses the lemonade was all drunk, an' the barge gone home."

Joseph understood that his new acquaintance meant he had been knocked insensible and left alone, and that when he recovered his opponent was gone.

"What more can you tell?"

"Jest this! I was that sick an' sore that I was fit ter go ter the Morgue direct, an' I lost interest in things immediate. I couldn't walk, but I crawled off across the street an' finally got home, an' there I has laid ever since. I live alone, an' I hadn't nawthin' ter eat until this eve. Then I come out fer a feed, an' I thought I would come around an' see ef I could hev' one more scrap with the feller who did me up."

"Who was he?"

"Don't know."

"What did he look like?"

"Didn't see him close enough ter know."

"Surely, you have some idea."

"I wish I had, but I haven't. He was a well-built feller, rather short, but strong as a moose."

"Do you think he was one of the crew of the schooner?"

"No. Say, his victim must hev' belonged there, fer he come out. Who was he? Where's all the crew? Where's the lame captain?"

"Was the captain lame?"

"Sure! He used a cane, and limped at that."

Joseph was thoughtful. He had seen the alleged Captain Clarendon, journeyed with him some distance, and walked a part of the way, yet he had seen no sign of lameness. The captain had been light and springy of step. It was a sudden recovery for a man who had been obliged to use a cane only the day before, and it did not look just right.

Craps Mulligan was questioned further, and he told what he had seen with readiness and despatch. He seemed to have kept his eyes open more than the other loungers of South Street, and, as a result, the detective had a fairly good account of the events that had taken place above deck while the "Smiling Sally" lay at her pier.

"Would you," asked Joseph presently, "know the lame captain if you were to see him again?"

"Sure, Mike!" declared Craps.

"Had you just as soon go to look at the murdered man?"

"Just what I want ter do, boss."

The speaker was such a mass of bandages that, rather than pilot him through the streets in that condition, Joseph called a carriage, and they rode to the shop of the undertaker who had charge of the dead man. Craps approved of that method of traveling, and he was strong in his expressions of thanks for the "pleasure" the detective had given him, as he termed it.

Their destination was duly reached, and the South Street lounge was conducted to the rear room. The murdered man had not yet been put in his final bed of wood, but the body lay on the boards at the rear of everything. Joseph raised the sheet.

"Look!" he directed. "Who is he?"

Craps had grown eager. He did not expect to recognize the murdered man, and he was so surprised at what he saw that he was slow to make reply. His gaze lingered but briefly on the still face; then it sought the one of life. Craps looked puzzled and uncertain.

"Why," he murmured, in the same mood, "this is the lame captain!"

"What captain?"

"Why, the man who commanded the 'Smiling Sally.'"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course I'm sure."

"He has not before been identified as the captain."

"Can't help that. He's the man who commanded the schooner, and walked with a cane. I kin swear to that," was the emphatic reply.

"Maybe he was the mate?"

"Say, that schooner hadn't much of a crew, nohow, an' I never see nobody but this one man orderin' the hands around. I guess she run about as short-handed as they could run her, an' that's why I never see only one boss. I reckon there was a

man who took charge when she was out ter sea an' the captain slept, but at the pier there was only one boss that I ever seen. This was the one, an' he was the captain. Now that I think of it, Mugsy Cronin, a friend o' mine, went ter the schooner an' tried ter ship on board o' her. He saw this man, an' he said he was captain—Clarendon was the name. This is him!"

Craps tapped his finger emphatically on the dead man's brow, and his confidence was strong.

"This is the captain o' the 'Smiling Sally!'" he added.

CHAPTER X.

DANGER FOR THE DETECTIVE.

The detective was not one to let his face tell too much, but, in reality, he was both impressed and pleased by this testimony. He believed all that Craps Mulligan had said. The fellow had no reason to speak falsely, that he could see, and it tallied with what he had learned before. During the walk with Nathaniel Grafton's new heir the conversation had briefly dwelt upon nautical matters. He had not sought to test the so-called Captain Clarendon, but he had been impressed with the idea that the latter knew but little of sea life and ways.

"I think," was the Expert's mental verdict, "that Maggie Roach does well to suspect the new heir."

Craps was full of desire to talk, and Joseph let him wander on to his fill. Silently he made record of all that was gleaned. Despite the wealth of bandages on his companion's head, he could see enough to tell that Craps was not ill-looking, for the class he represented. He was a product of the half of New York life that gave nothing to commend, but he did not look vicious. The special was very polite and good-natured with him, for Craps might yet be useful farther.

When they left the undertaker's it was to return to South Street, but the detective did not part with Craps immediately. They hunted up his friend, Mugsy Cronin, and the latter was questioned relative to his application to Captain Clarendon for a chance to ship on the "Smiling Sally." Mr. Cronin did not look like the sort of a man any reader of human nature would choose for a member of his crew, but he did not know this, and he was full of complaints against Clarendon.

He stated that he had been refused by the captain in the face of the fact that the crew had been insufficient to properly bring the schooner to her dock when she arrived; that he was not allowed to go below decks when he applied for a chance; that all, captain and members of the crew, were taciturn and uncivil, and that the vessel was thoroughly unseaworthy.

"Ship in her," exclaimed Mugsy; "why, after I had looked her over more I wouldn't hev' trusted my life in her outside o' the lower bay!"

"It seems others did."

"Then they was fools. She was terrible old, and just about rotten. Why, what cargo could they carry on her? I can't see, by jing!"

So the detective went away from Mugsy with his suspicions added to not a little. Craps was anxious to keep with his new friend, but the beating he had received had really injured him, and he had stood the strain as long as he could. He went home.

Joseph was near the late pier of the "Smiling Sally," and he went out a little ways and stood in thought. No other vessel had taken the place of the schooner, but not far off there were plenty of craft. It was always so, and, to Joseph, there were few more interesting points in the city than that stretch of South Street with the many tall masts rising so sharply skyward.

It was like a new world rather than a part of the big city back of the street.

He walked to the end of the pier and looked thoughtfully at the line of ferryboats and other craft that passed along with twinkling lights, like giant fireflies of

the night. But he did not heed the lights or the vessels.

"Maggie and her friends, the Harpers, are right," he agreed, mentally; "there is crookedness in all this. Levi Overbridge has been working a scheme, and it is not hard to surmise what it is. He seeks to give Grafton a false heir, and when it is done the old lawyer will have the heir in his power. That will fatten Levi's pocketbook. But what is all the sideplay? Who was the original Captain Clarendon of the scheme? Why was he killed? Who is this sleek young fellow who has taken his place?"

A strong wind came down from the direction of the big bridge. It hummed musically here, and whistled there in ghostly style as it was cut by the masts of the vessels. A strong breeze, blowing shoreward from the Secret Service Expert.

There were steps on the pier—soft, slow, secret steps. Joseph did not hear them. The wind was wrong.

Other men were on the pier. They had come slyly; they advanced closer to the detective without his knowledge. Two burly, roughly-clad fellows they were, yet they were soft of foot then, and the wind did the rest.

Creep, creep, creep! They drew nearer to Joseph, their gaze fixed upon him. He heard nothing; he saw nothing.

Their hands were slightly extended. The hands were not empty. Something protruded from their clutch, and a transient ray of light, flashing out from a passing craft, brought a bright gleam from the objects in their hands. An ominous gleam it was.

Nearer, nearer yet! They were close to the detective, still creeping, still eyeing him sharply—their manner like that of panthers about to spring upon their prey.

Joseph drew a deep breath as he suddenly aroused from thought. Impatient at his own delay, he wheeled abruptly.

He came face to face with the creepers.

It was a mutual surprise, but to him it was more than that. He saw, at one glance, the skulkers and the glittering things in their hands. He knew what that meant.

A mutual surprise, yet the advantage was with them on account of their previous intentions. They stirred into fresh activity, and their sudden straightening up was suggestive.

The detective showed the result of his previous training in rough work. A light spring carried him back a pace, and his hand sought his hip-pocket. The motion was not lost on the skulkers.

"At him, Bob!" cried one of them.

They leaped to the attack.

Joseph had a double task to accomplish. He must draw the revolver he sought, and avoid the knives, all in the same breath. He tried to do it, but the knives gleamed above his head. The revolver was not yet drawn, and the odds were greatly against him.

The knives fell.

Almost at the same instant he struck his heel against an obstruction. It was a potent factor in the case. He tripped and tumbled to the pier at one motion. The knives vainly cut the air.

The impetus of the would-be assassins was too much for them—they stumbled over Joseph, and one of them fell entirely, sprawling upon the detective.

The latter was ready for the ordeal. He knew their intention, and that only prompt action would save his life. He bestirred himself to meet the danger, and squirmed quickly out from under his fallen foe. Even with the odds against him he made as good time as they, and all three came up together.

He did not try to talk with them. Conscious of his danger and what was needed to avert it, he leaped upon them almost as soon as he rose to his feet. His clinched hands were sent out in telling blows, and one of the pair went down at once. The detective attacked the other fiercely. He rained blow after blow upon him, and the assassin, having lost his knife, was obliged to resort to the same means to hold his own. He was not successful. The onslaught was too impetuous for him.

and he was driven back steadily, failing to make a systematic resistance.

Joseph did not lose sight of the second man, and danger was soon visible from that quarter. The fellow came to his feet, fumbled around on the pier, and then advanced to the attack.

He had the detective's back toward him, and all seemed favorable for his purpose. Really, he was watched with catlike caution, and the single man prepared for the crisis.

Forward rushed the assassin, a knife swung up for use, and when he was near enough he lunged forward with all his force.

Lightly Joseph leaped to one side.

The assassin missed his aim, but hit something else. His impetus carried him on, and the knife struck his comrade.

Then followed a heavy plunge in the water.

It was all done so quickly that the detective could not realize the situation in full immediately, but it was soon clear to him. The user of the knife had tumbled off the pier, and the man upon whom he had unintentionally used it lay just at the verge.

Now, for the first time, Joseph had opportunity to draw his revolver. He improved the chance and stood on the defensive, but there was nobody to attack him farther. No sound came from the water, and the wounded man lay groaning where he had fallen. This lull continued for several minutes before Joseph would allow himself to relax any part of his caution, but, as there was no manifestation from the invisible thug, he moved forward to the one who was there.

"Well," he called out, none too sympathetically, "how do you like it, as far as you have gone?"

"I am a dead man!" groaned the fallen rough.

"You know whom to thank."

"I have got the knife in my heart."

"Maybe it will make you less willing to try to give other people the same sort of deal."

"Fool, fool that I was!"

"Did you think I had money?"

"They hired me to do it."

"The dickens they did! Why?"

"To get you out of the way."

"Ah! now you talk. Who hired you?"

"Dan Flint and Barney Lyons."

One of the names was new to Joseph; the other was not, and it suggested a good deal to him. As little as he had learned of the plot against Nathaniel Grafton, he was aware that a man named Barney Lyons had been much with Levi Overbridge, and that was one reason why he believed there was good cause for doubting Levi. Barney did not bear a good name.

"Why did they want to do this?" he inquired.

"I don't know. Barney hired Dan, and Dan got me ter help him. I was a blamed fool—Dan's knife has done for me."

"When did they hire you?"

"Not two hours ago."

"Haven't you any idea why they wanted me killed?"

"Barney told Dan that you was in his way. That's all I know."

Much as he would have liked to gain fuller proof, Joseph did not think it was absolutely necessary to the understanding of the attack. Barney was Levi's companion. No doubt the conspirators had learned that he was on their trail, and intended to remove him by violent means.

The Secret Service Expert knelt by the wounded man and studied the situation. A detective case that brought such desperate assaults must have much back of it, and he knew a hard fight was on with the backers of Captain Clarendon. Starting, finally, he rose abruptly.

"Come!" he directed. "You do not talk like a fatally hurt man. Let me take you to a place where your wounds can be attended to."

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. HART, HOUSEKEEPER.

The following morning Maggie left the Grafton house as soon as she had attended to her duties in a hurried fashion. She had a business air, and Nathaniel seemed

to take unusual interest in her going. He made a comment to Tommy Fogg that, as it proved, explained his feeling in the case.

"My housekeeper is coming home," he explained.

Tommy had heard it said that one Mrs. Hart, who had long officiated in that capacity for Nathaniel, was away to see a relative who was ill. He never had seen that he need to care for Mrs. Hart, one way or the other, and he saw as little now.

"Ah!" he answered, with polite attention.

"Mrs. Hart is a very superior person," proceeded Grafton.

"That will make her return pleasant to you."

"So it will—so it will!" cried the old man, his eyes brightening up. "Maybe she will know how to deal with the gypsies."

"Don't you know, sir? If they are obnoxious, why not fire them out, body and boots?"

"Why, you see—you see, I don't just like to do that. I knew them once, and—but Mrs. Hart will understand their case."

Tommy did not press the point, but he saw by Mr. Grafton's manner, as he had seen in many other ways that the gypsies still held a rod of iron over him. Whatever the secrets of the past might be, they were in power at the house, not Nathaniel Grafton.

The latter evidently wanted to say no more of his unwelcome guests, so he returned to the more congenial subject.

"Mrs. Hart is really a remarkable woman," he repeated, "She might have had any position in woman's sphere, in the past, but she preferred to remain here. Something like twenty years ago she came; she has been here ever since."

"As housekeeper?"

"Yes, and, also—well, she has—she has been a sort of confidential secretary, as you may say, to me. An intelligent woman, sir, and a capable mistress of a home. I—I think she will know how to deal with Gideon Lee and his tribe."

The hopeful look on the speaker's face increased, and Tommy Fogg grew positively anxious to see Mrs. Hart. She would be welcome if she could cast the gypsies out—unless she did more, and punctured the bubble of Tommy's own hold on the situation. Since he dared not give up of his own free will, he did not want anybody else to oust him.

When he left Grafton he went downstairs. Al Skinner and Zarah Lee were in the parlor. The gypsy girl was anxious to talk to somebody all the while, for she had overflowing animal spirits, and she and Al had grown quite friendly. Each was as talkative as the other could desire.

Gideon and Gormora had gone out, telling no one whither they were bound, for Zarah was not in their confidence fully. Theirs were old heads; hers was a young head, and they knew too much to be free with her on serious matters.

Such was the situation while Maggie was gone.

Tommy Fogg's mind wandered from the capable housekeeper, and it was mere chance that, later, he went again to Mr. Grafton's room. As a dutiful heir he was bound to make some show of interest in the old man, and this he did, though more with hope of clemency when his imposition came out than anything else.

The interview was not comfortable to Tommy, for Grafton, with his slight return of animation, had many questions to ask about sea life which the false heir was poorly qualified to answer, and the latter drew a sigh of relief when the door opened.

A lady entered unannounced.

Instinctively Tommy knew that the capable housekeeper was on the scene, but he was surprised at sight of her. Little did she seem like a housekeeper.

She was of middle age and well preserved, with many striking features of bodily and facial appearance. Her weight must have been nearly one hundred and eighty pounds, and it was mostly substantial bone and muscle. Her wrists were large, and her shoulders of good breadth,

and, on the whole, she was a woman of surprising strength, free from masculinity and grossness. Her face was broad, finely colored, and indicative of the best of health, and it was also indicative of tremendous will power.

At the start Tommy Fogg was deeply impressed, and when he saw that she looked, not at Grafton, but at him, he began to feel uncomfortable.

Grafton, however, suddenly looked ten years younger.

"Welcome back, Mrs. Hart!" he exclaimed. "I am very glad to see you. We have all missed you; welcome home. Oswald, this is our housekeeper. Mrs. Hart, let me present my nephew, Captain Clarendon, late of the good ship 'Smiling Sally.'"

Tommy Fogg found a pair of keen eyes studying him, it seemed, and he felt most uncomfortable. He could not explain the matter, even to himself, but those eyes appeared to be two daggers that were seeking to probe his heart and wrest away his secrets. Getting flustered, he rose and bowed in his worst way while trying to show his best.

"Mrs. Hart, I assure you we are glad to see you back," he asserted, like a timid schoolboy.

The capable housekeeper returned his bow in silence.

"This is my long-lost heir, you know, Mrs. Hart," added Grafton.

"Maggie has told me of him."

Calmly Mrs. Hart made the reply, and her gaze still dwelt upon Mr. Fogg's features.

"A glorious reunion," went on the old man, bubbling over with delight. "Lost for many years, but now recovered."

"I do not see that he resembles you, sir," replied the housekeeper.

"Remember that the relationship is distant," reminded Grafton.

"Very distant."

Was it the imagination of a guilty mind, or was there significant skepticism in her terse answer.

"My second cousin's son, you know," explained the master of the house, with exactness.

"Found by Levi Overbridge," spoke the lady, steadily.

"Yes, yes; Levi found him. Levi is cunning—"

"Decidedly so."

With this dry response, Mrs. Hart went a step closer to Tommy.

"So you are the lad who ran away from here fifteen years ago? I should not have suspected it."

"On the other hand, madam," desperately asserted Tommy, "I remember you perfectly well."

"Indeed?" and her voice took an upward turn in conjunction with her brows, as if she expressed surprise. "Pray, what do you remember about me?"

She had herself well under control, but there was something that told the impostor he had made a mistake. He did not know how. He had been told by Grafton that she had been there for twenty years, and he supposed he ought to know her, but there was the decided impression that he had blundered somehow. How? His color changed unpleasantly, and he would have been wholly at a loss had not Grafton broken in.

"There's a memory for you, Mrs. Hart. I don't suppose he ever heard you mentioned more than once or twice, but the name clings in his mind. Eh, captain?"

"Quite right, sir," agreed Tommy, feeling in a miserable condition of body and mind.

"Not a feature like the Graftons," added Mrs. Hart.

"His grandmother was a Grafton; that's the degree of the relationship. You can't expect him to look just like me. Still, he has some Grafton features. The eyes, nose, forehead and chin are like my family."

"Perhaps Levi Overbridge can distinguish the fact."

With this unpleasant remark the capable housekeeper passed to the farther side of the room and rearranged some trivial article with care. Tommy secretly mopped

his brow, though there was no good reason why he should be warm. He was frightened by this cool woman of penetrating gaze.

"Several changes have taken place since you went to see your sick relative, Mrs. Hart," pursued Grafton.

"I should say so."

"Have you met the other guests—the Lees—since you came back?"

"I shall see them directly," and Mrs. Hart looked as if she was preparing for another battle.

"Of course they will remain but briefly, but our friend here, my heir, Captain Clarendon, of the good ship 'Smiling Sally,' he is a fixture, of course."

The housekeeper turned quickly and came close to Tommy.

"Are you anxious to be heir here?" she demanded.

"That is as Mr. Grafton wishes," replied the wretched impostor.

"You are all at his service?"

"Exactly, madam."

"The Oswald Clarendon of fifteen years ago was a high-spirited boy, and you seem like wax. Are you sure you are not a changeling?"

"Time has changed me," explained Tommy, moving restlessly.

"Amazingly, sir; amazingly! Later, I shall be glad to hear the story of your life. I doubt not it would be of interest. I feel interested in you because you are interested in the Grafton money. It will be a pleasure to me to see how you satisfied everybody that you were the heir. Anyhow, we give you welcome, Oswald!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEFIANT GYPSIES.

There was a peculiar smile on Mrs. Hart's face as she made this remark. If Tommy Fogg read it aright he had fresh warning that there was trouble in store for him, but hostilities were not pressed then. She moved to the door, and—he was very willing to see her go—her last remark was unrequited by him. He had never seen life in a sphere as high even as that of the middle classes, but he knew enough to realize that she was a remarkable housekeeper in one way, if not in another—yet he dared not object to her strange remarks.

His fictitious position was tottering, and he would not hasten the fall by angering this terrible woman.

Seeing that she was to get no response, she passed quietly out of the room without more conversation. She met Maggie in the hall. The latter looked far more hopeful than at any time since trouble had begun in the house, and she had something to say to the housekeeper.

"The gypsies are all in the parlor, ma'am."

"I will see them."

They passed down the stairs, Maggie several steps behind her companion. She felt that there was to be a scene in the parlor, and she wanted to hear it all, but she did not desire to be in the difficulty. Not so with her predecessor, who walked into the parlor with calm resolution.

The gypsies were all there, Gideon and Gormora as ill-clad and dirty as ever, and Zarah handsome and flashy. They looked up as the intruder came, and, recognizing a new face, gazed hard at her. Zarah was the least concerned, for she did not know that their position was so peculiar, and, as she had Ai Skinner by her side, as usual, she was happy and careless.

The new gaze took in all, but dwelt longest on the older gypsies. There was a very short pause; then she spoke calmly.

"My name is Hart, housekeeper. Your rooms are ready."

That qualification of mind of which men are ignorant, but which is an instinct with women, enabled Gormora to understand clearly that a gantlet of battle had been thrown at her feet. She was perplexed, and she did not understand who this imperious person was, but her own eyes glittered significantly as she replied:

"We have been to our rooms."

"They are ready again."

"We are satisfied here."

"This is not a common room."

"It is the practice of the Americans to give their best to guests."

"Seek it in your rooms. This is not a lounging room. Nobody else has made such free use of the parlor in twenty years. You will find your rooms ready."

"We will stay here."

Gormora was becoming angry. She resented the manner of this invader as much as her words, and sheer stubbornness made her resolve to disobey her wishes.

"Did you understand that I said I was housekeeper here?" pursued Mrs. Hart.

"Yes."

"Your rooms are ready."

"Look you!" exclaimed Gormora, "we shall go to our rooms when we wish, and not before. Think you the gypsies are slaves to be ordered around by you? The dogs of the Americans snap at the heels of the wandering people, but they are scorned. Here, there, everywhere, the gypsies are their own rulers. There, here! We obey nobody; we will not go to our rooms. We stay here!"

"Right!" agreed Gideon, breaking his silence for the first time. "We do not take any orders. We stay here!"

"Just as you say. For once I give you permission to use your own will—for once. After this I am to be obeyed; I am mistress of this house, and I refuse to let any will govern but my own. This time, stay. I meant very well, though. This room is about to be cleaned, and I thought the dust would not be agreeable. Maggie, bring sweepers and dusters."

Gormora did not understand what that meant, for she never had swept or dusted, but Maggie did. The girl caught at the idea and hastened to obey. The gypsies, wondering somewhat, regarded the housekeeper with fresh hostility.

"What are you here?" asked Gormora, curtly.

"Mistress!"

"Of what?"

"This house."

"I have not seen you before."

"You will see me often enough after this," coolly replied Mrs. Hart.

"You are not to interfere with us."

"And you are not to interfere with my duties. If you remain under this roof you will have to abide by my wishes."

"Do you order us?"

"I order all things in this house."

"We will go to Nathaniel Grafton and you will be thrown out. We are his guests—his equals. No slight will we endure from you; we are as good as you. Look you, we are free gypsies; we do as we please. We are wanderers of the world, and the world is our own."

"You have quite extensive possessions. Mine is limited to this house, and I shall convince you that it is mine to run as I please."

It was plain talk all around, and it might have gone on to something serious had not Maggie returned. She came armed with the articles she had been sent for, and no more time was lost. Mrs. Hart gave one brief order, and then she and Maggie fell to work. Rugs were lifted and placed aside, and then the sweeping began. Dust rolled up not only from the sweeping itself, but from articles shaken freely.

The indifference of the gypsies vanished. They had been accustomed to dirt all their lives, and carried a supply of it on their persons with utter unconcern, but it was not the thin, suffocating, tantalizing powder that now sifted into their throats and nostrils.

Zarah grew disgusted, Gideon moved uneasily, and even Gormora betrayed her aversion. Thicker grew the dust, and the ordeal proved too much. Gormora suddenly rose.

"We will come again," she remarked, and, with this she passed out of the parlor, Gideon and Zarah following.

Ai Skinner would have followed also, but Mrs. Hart suddenly cut him off.

"Are you a gypsy?" she demanded, sharply.

"No, my dear madam," replied the young man, with his sunniest smile. "I am Mr. Skinner, late of the Royal United and Unexcelled Circus, but more recently and now valet to Captain Clarendon, of the United States Navy."

"Valet to Clarendon!"

"Yes, madam. Tommy—ahem!—Oswald and I are old chums."

"Being a servant, your place is in the servants' quarters. Why are you in this room?"

"Why, you see that charming girl invited me in, and—I did the rest."

"Hereafter, when not with your master, stay in the kitchen."

"But, my dear madam, I am a sort of confidential friend and—"

"Go to the kitchen!"

"Really, you pain me—"

"Where is your master?"

With this Mrs. Hart turned so sharply upon Ai that he grew bewildered and frightened.

"I haven't any!" he gasped. "I am of age—Ai Skinner, late of the Royal United and—"

"Ma'am," interposed Maggie, "I think he is a little weak-minded."

"I should say he was very much so. Get out of here!"

So saying, the housekeeper seized Ai by the shoulders and hustled him out without ceremony. He went whirling along the hall, and the parlor door slammed after him.

He stopped and stared blankly.

"Well, that is the most violent and ungentlemanly woman—I mean, unwomanly gentleman—hang it! I don't know what I do mean, but her manners were atrocious. And I had plainly told her I was a circus star! She should have used more gentleness with me. However, it don't matter; she isn't responsible for her breeding, and I can easily have her discharged. I will see Captain Fogg about it—I mean, Tommy Clarendon."

Ai saw nothing of the gypsies, and it was clear that Mrs. Hart had won the first round in the battle by means as decisive as they were simple.

There were no more clashes during the day. Mrs. Hart was active, and she seemed to be everywhere. Her household duties must have been exacting, for they seemed to give her no peace. The marks of the gypsies' unclean occupancy were effaced, and with tremendous energy of movement.

All this was under the eyes of the swarthy people, and often in their own rooms, but they had nothing to say. Possibly this was the result of a conference between them. Certain it is that they kept sullen silence through it all.

Maggie gloried in the change. She hated the gypsies and admired Mrs. Hart, so she made a good assistant. Still, there was in the girl's mind the impression that the fight was not over. Dull reader of human nature would that person be who could not see that the spirits of the swarthy people were untamed, and that a new outbreak might come at any moment.

Maggie was afraid of them. She had cause to be.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GYPSY WITH THE KNIFE.

The false Captain Clarendon found his position constantly growing more precarious. Mrs. Hart had not smoothed over her speeches to him in the least, and he knew she suspected the cheat he was practising. That there was no more than suspicion Tommy Fogg felt assured of, but the outlook was dark.

He talked with Ai Skinner, but Ai was not the man to give practical advice or consolation, and Tommy had to bear the whole burden alone. In the afternoon he walked over to see Levi Overbridge, but there he found little hope.

The old farmer was worried by the return of Mrs. Hart.

"I sprang my claim of a newly-found heir on Grafton when she was away purposely," he explained, "and I had hoped she would remain away. She had a sick relative; I hoped the relative would remain sick."

"Must we endure this offensive woman?" asked Tommy.

"I fear we must, my boy."

"She is turning the house upside down."

"She resents your coming, of course. Very likely she has expected a slice of the old man's money, on the strength of her long service."

"She seems to run the house and him too."

"A brainy woman, and of tireless energy. It always wearies me physically to see her at work—she makes it so serious a matter."

"Unless she can be driven out she will ruin us. I tell you she does not take any stock in my claim."

Overbridge sighed and moved uneasily. He deeply regretted ever having tried to find an heir. With Korgan Murch he had labored so long and carefully that success seemed reasonably certain, he believed, but Tommy had been substituted off-hand, without due teaching, and, worst of all, with the shadow of Korgan Murch's death back of it all.

Korgan's murder was being investigated carefully, and he feared they would all become tangled up in it."

"Then," added Tommy Fogg, "there are those accursed gypsies. Can nothing be done to oust them?"

"Your account shows that they are well entrenched with Grafton. His fear of them is not all the result of mental decay, though that colors it all."

"What hold can they have upon him?"

"From what you say it seems plain that they knew him once, twenty years ago. I can partially surmise what that means. Grafton's father was alive then, and so was an older brother. Nathaniel did not appear likely to inherit much of the property, chiefly because he did not deserve it."

"Dissipated?"

"Yes. Not that he was repulsive in that way, but he lived a fast life until middle age; until nearly the time when his father died. Often there were periods when nobody knew where he was. You say the gypsies claimed that a stranger came to their camp. That was Nathaniel. It would not surprise me if he really joined them for a time, though he was then nearly forty years old."

"A precious sort of a fellow."

"He reformed. His brother died, and he came home, regained his father's good will, inherited the property and settled down almost as a hermit."

"It seems that Mrs. Hart has gained strong hold over him since."

"She has been the business head of the house. She is really a very remarkable woman in that way. Better keep on good terms with her for awhile. She is likely to get rid of the gypsies, and that will relieve your feelings and remove a part of the nervous excitement of the situation."

"I wish I were out of it all."

"You are not, and you can't go. As you have pointed out, if you leave it will make you liable to suspicion of having killed Korgan Murch. You—we must hang to our position."

Overbridge sighed as he spoke, and that was all the consolation Tommy Fogg received. He went home more disgusted with himself than ever. He was sincerely ashamed of deceiving a broken old man; he was full of repentance for having turned scoundrel, as he mentally expressed it; and fear of various things kept him stirred up in other ways.

Shortly after dark that evening he was near the window of his room, when he chanced to notice somebody on the opposite side of the street. It was not that a man was there, but his manner was suspicious. He walked back and forth, looking often at the house, and scanning each window by turn. A secret skulker he seemed to be, and Tommy kept up the watch.

"He is as swarthy as the gypsies," thought the impostor. "In fact, he may be of that race, though he is also a little like an Italian. Can he be meditating lawless work? If so, he is not very cunning."

Steps sounded on the stairs, and Tommy

realized that one of the gypsies was going down. Soon after he saw the swarthy skulker suddenly start across the street, and the coincidence was so noticeable that Tommy looked out of the window. He saw the man admitted by somebody, and then the sound of steps came again on the stairs. Not one person only, but two went to the third floor.

The impostor grew interested. The gypsies were receiving an old acquaintance, and he was curious to know more about it. He did not know where Ai was, but, at a venture, he left his own room and ascended to that of his so-called valet. Ai was there, reading a comic paper and laughing heartily.

His high spirits went out when Tommy explained a little. The latter went to the connecting door and sought to overhear the talk in the next room. It was not hard; the gypsies spoke with singular lack of caution.

"We have found a home in high society," Gideon Lee was saying.

"I would not give a rushlight for it," came in the voice of the stranger. "Give me the free fields and the gypsy wagons."

"We agree with you, but this is a change. We shall not always be here."

"It was curious that I happened on you, but when I saw you enter the house I thought it was you. I waited two hours for you to come out; then I came boldly in front of the house."

"It was a lucky find."

"You speak of trivial things," broke in Gormora, harshly. "What luck, Esrad Dyer?"

"Good!"

"Have you done your work?"

"Not yet."

"Then why do you say your luck is good?"

"I am on the track."

"Aha! say you so?"

"I am on the track, and not long will it be before I shall have the game bagged, I think. A little more time, and then—"

"Vengeance!" cried Gormora, fiercely.

"Vengeance!" echoed Esrad Dyer. "Yes, it is near at hand, and when the time comes I shall be merciless. Think of the long search I have made, the chase over many States. He has evaded me long, but I have sworn by all the things dear to the gypsy that he shall die. Like the bloodhound have I followed the trail; like the bloodhound will I suck his blood. Let this be the sign of my vow!"

There was a dull, heavy sound against the connecting door that made Ai leap back precipitately. There was enough vehemence in the next room to make both of the watchers nervous.

"Look!" added Esrad Dyer. "My knife sticks in the door. So will it soon stick in the heart of Korgan Murch!"

"Korgan Murch!" gasped Tommy Fogg.

"Weeks, months have I hunted him," pursued Dyer, excitedly, "but the end is near. I am on his track; I will kill him; the gypsy will have his revenge."

"Good, good!" exclaimed Gormora.

"Tire not, rest not until it is done."

"It will be soon. I know the man. He is here in New York, and I am on his track. He has a false name, and maybe he thinks he can baffle me, but I say he shall die."

"What is his name now?" asked Gideon Lee.

"Captain Clarendon!"

"Oh!" gasped Ai, and Tommy Fogg was not much less excited. The terrible, dramatic energy of Esrad Dyer had given them full knowledge of his nature, and they saw their danger.

There were sounds in the next room as if the gypsies had leaped up in their excitement.

"Who?" cried Gormora, harshly.

"Captain Clarendon, and he is master of the schooner 'Smiling Sally,' which has been—"

"The same, the same!" loudly proclaimed Gormora.

"Have you heard of him?"

"Heard of him? He is here!"

"Where?"

"In this house!"

"What?" came hotly from Esrad Dyer.

"He is in this house."

"Korgan Murch is here?" repeated Dyer, incredulously.

"Captain Clarendon is here!"

"Show him to me!" ordered the avenger. "I had lost sight of him, and I did not know—Here, here! Show him to me, now. My knife is ready. Show him to me!"

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" wailed Ai, "we are lost. He will kill us!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MARKED MAN.

Ai Skinner was pale and weak, and Tommy Fogg was not much less upset. The previous warnings of the danger had been nothing compared with what they had to face now. Esrad Dyer had opened a new fountain of peril, and it flowed on impelled by the fire of his nature.

The impostors felt that their end was near.

"Stop!" directed Gideon Lee, in the next room. "There may be some mistake here. Are you sure you are right as to your man, Esrad Dyer? None of us knows how Korgan Murch looks, but the man who answers to the name of Captain Clarendon is not like a gypsy. We have been told that Korgan Murch was of our own people. Captain Clarendon is of lighter skin than we."

"That proves nothing," Dyer maintained. "He is the man."

"All can be proved by your looking at our man, if you have seen Korgan Murch. You shall look and see if they are one."

"Useless! I cannot tell by sight; I have not seen Korgan Murch. I have followed him by inquiry. From one point to another, from one State to another, have I pursued, getting news of him here and there, and moving on to the end. From good authority I have it that he has become master of a schooner called the 'Smiling Sally.' I suppose he must have been an old sailor, yet it surprised me to know he was suddenly changed from a wanderer to a sea captain. My information is sure, and, though I do not know how he looks, I can swear he is now Captain Clarendon, of the 'Smiling Sally.'"

"Then we can swear he is now in this house."

"Show him to me!" cried Esrad, again. "I will kill him this hour! Lead to him now!"

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" moaned Ai, "we are dead men!"

"This ends us," admitted Tommy. "I saw enough of that fellow when he was on the street to be sure he is just as terrible as his words indicate, and they have us cornered now. We must bear the sins of Korgan Murch and meet his allotted death."

"Let us flee, Tommy! Let us get out of the house."

"And be arrested by Joseph Chester for killing the man on the pier? I believe he has set his spies upon us; I am sure I was followed to Overbridge's house. Now, if we try to run away we shall be put under arrest by Chester."

"Let him do it. I don't care."

"Would you go to prison?"

"Gladly, gladly! Anything to escape the knife of that monster in the next room. Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, he will carve us up like rare beef! Prison! Gladly will I go. Welcome its rocky walls and iron beds, its rack of torture and its devices for producing agony. Welcome its peace, rest, safety from Esrad Dyer, starvation and torture. Let us go, Tommy; let us apply to be torn limb from limb by the Inquisition and quartered by neighing horses—"

"Stop! You talk nonsense! We are in double danger, but, great as is the menace of the gypsy avenger, that is the least."

"No, no! I want to die legally, if at all."

"I do not!" cried Fogg. "Look! I have been a good-for-nothing for two years—oh! the shame of it!—but I am not all vile, nor wholly lost to pride. Let them arrest us and our whole past will be learned. Our friends, who are industrious and respectable, will learn of our fate, and then—would you bring shame and agony to

them? I would not; I will not! Flee? Never! Rather than that I will face the gypsy's knife. He may kill the body; he cannot bring undying shame. I stay! I will dare the gypsy's knife!"

Tommy spoke with vehemence. He had cast off the thrall of good-for-nothingism that had chained him during the past years, and the light in his eyes told of fixed purpose. Manhood was renewed, and it was a noble change.

Ai Skinner was not in line. It took more to touch Ai's inclinations to self-respect, and it was doubtful if anything could stir him much. Just then, too, he had room only for fear of Esrad Dyer's knife!"

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg," he lamented, "this settles it. The fierce gypsy will finish us off, and the daisies and buttercups will soon be growing over our unwatered graves."

Tommy moved closer to the door. It was not well to lose any chance to get more light on the plans of the gypsies.

"There must not be rash action," Gideon Lee was saying. "I would not delay your vengeance, and you know we all want vengeance as much as you."

"Ay, that is it!" cried Gormora. "Blood for blood, life for life!"

"And now, now!" hissed Esrad.

"Not now!" firmly replied Gideon. "We have Korgan Murch under our eyes, and he cannot escape. Let us be content with that; it is not the only act of vengeance we have to do, and all must be in harmony. Esrad, you are young. You do not know all the things that have come to the Lees in the past. There is another wrong to right, and it is here. Keep your hands off of Korgan Murch until we give you leave to strike."

"Do you know what this matter is to me?"

"Is it less to us?"

"Gideon is right," added Gormora. "Much as I want you to accomplish your work, there must not be too much precipitation. Look ye, Esrad Dyer, I, too, have sworn an oath, and there will be rivers of red here when the gypsy wanderers strike. Be patient!"

The knife man was not satisfied to agree, but both of his companions added their arguments until he sullenly yielded to their wishes. He promised to keep his hands off until there was a change in the situation, or they gave him leave.

"But," he added, "I shall never be far from this Captain Clarendon. I will haunt his steps persistently; he shall go nowhere without me at his heels. Like the bloodhound will I follow him. Not once shall he leave this house without my eyes being upon him, and, if he seeks to flee, I will strike him down at once, be the time and the place what it may."

Tommy Fogg shivered. It was no small thing to have this merciless avenger on his track. Shut in between the reaching arm of the law and the fire of Esrad's hate, the outlook was poor for the impostor.

He heard the gypsy cross the room and withdraw his knife from the door. A moment more, and his voice came in thick utterance.

"Look!" he spoke. "This is my true steel. I bought it for a purpose, and it will accomplish its mission. This will take the life of Korgan Murch. Then I will bury it in the earth deeply, for it will be stained with base blood. This is my vow. See! I kiss the knife!"

Tommy Fogg could imagine him doing it, and the fancy made the miserable impostor shiver anew. All of the gypsies had a tremendous power in their way, but Esrad Dyer, carrying his purpose of vengeance and sealing the vow by kissing the knife, was most terrible of all.

Esrad had nearly finished his visit. He and the Lees spoke of minor matters, and then he prepared to depart. Briefly he added something about the supposed Korgan Murch, and again he declared that he would dog the steps of the impostor if he left the house, and kill him at once if he sought to escape.

Then Dyer went his way.

Tommy stood at the window and watched him go. Esrad was not tall and

spare, like the Lees, but he had tremendous physical strength, and as Tommy surveyed his great, broad shoulders, massive arms, and general show of ox-like strength, he knew he would have no chance with the man who kissed the knife.

He was watching him slouch off down the block, when Ai came humbly to his side. Ai's desire was the same old one—to flee from the associations that had palled upon them and grown full of import of death, but Tommy pointed out that there was now a second reason why they could not run away.

Esrad had sworn to watch them, and they had cause to believe he would keep his oath.

"I give it all up," sighed Ai. "Hope is gone, but I will try to die like a hero and a member of the great circus family—Ai Skinner, bareback rider and champion vaulter. That's me! If that gypsy brave disposes of me first, you will please plant some buttercups over my grave. Let the lone mound be under a tree, so the wild, free birds will come and carol their merriest roundelays over my lifeless form—and you might set off a little red fire and a few Roman candles."

Ai wiped his eyes and turned away, as if overcome with grief, but his fancies, which once had seemed so amusing to Tommy, aroused no smile now. Life had grown more serious than it was when they wandered along the country roads, ragged and dirty, but happy.

Thomas Fogg was not a coward, and he soon threw off his fear of Esrad in a measure. On the whole, he was not sure but he rather welcomed the struggle with the swarthy avenger.

In that case, at least, he was not guilty. He could meet Esrad like a man, and if he died, it would be with his face to the enemy.

"I will purchase a revolver," he mused, "and if the fellow tries to do his work I will try lead on him. The danger is that he will stab me in the back; that would be like him. Still, I shall fight it out. I may win."

It was a brave resolution, but it had little strength back of it. He knew he was not in any way capable of meeting Dyer in such a contest, and that he had little hope of escaping the knife.

That night Ai refused to play the valet seriously enough to remain in a room on the same floor with the gypsies, so he accompanied Tommy to the room below. He was in hard luck, however; the change brought just the excitement he was seeking to avoid.

CHAPTER XV.

GORMORA GROWS HOSTILE.

After a while the Grafton house became silent and dark. One by one the inmates had retired to their places, and the delusive calm was complete. The widely separated interests seemed to have taken a recess from their struggles for mastery, and all things pointed to a night unbroken by their clashings.

Ai had taken a position on the lounge, modestly explaining that he was only a valet, and that such was his proper place. Tommy Fogg was not unwilling to have the bed to himself, for his blood had been heated by the events of the evening—he was willing to act the master, and have all possible room.

A period of excited thought followed, and then sleep.

When he woke it was with voices sounding unusually loud not far away. They were so pitched that he could not help giving them close and prompt attention, and discovery quickly ensued.

"Trouble in Nathaniel Grafton's room! Are the gypsies again at him?"

A brief while the listener lay thus, and then, as the fact became certain that there was trouble as he had mentioned, he took action. Springing out of bed, he threw on his necessary garments and hastened into the hall, leaving Ai peacefully sleeping.

Grafton's door was ajar, and the voices continued. He hurried over the threshold.

His first view brought back the scene of another night, for the old gentleman was

there, huddled up in bed, and Gideon Lee and Gormora were close to him; but this time he had another person present to fill in the space. Mrs. Hart was there. She was there, and, as usual when she took part in anything, she was the central figure. She faced the gypsies, and her cool, business-like tones were directed to them.

"You can take your choice," she was saying. "Go, or have me call for an officer."

"You dare not!" snapped Gormora.

"You quite mistake my capabilities," retorted Mrs. Hart. "Do you think I find it perfectly blissful to have you going like wild animals all over this house and trying to rob its inmates at night? You believe I would not be willing to forfeit such happiness, do you? Well, let me tell you that any possible trouble consequent upon the coming of an officer would be a relief to me."

"How about him?" and Gormora shot her arm out toward Grafton.

"The same."

"He dares not anger us. Ask him!"

"I am in charge here; I ask only myself. Even you are doubtful of your hold upon him, or you would not have tried to rob him now."

Tommy Fogg was being ignored by both parties, but his roving gaze discovered a desk near Grafton's bed that had been pried open. He could readily understand that the gypsies had been up to their old tricks; that they had sought to rob the master of the house, but had been prevented by Mrs. Hart's watchful care.

To the last words the gypsy woman made no reply, but she shrugged her shoulders as if to indicate that she cared nothing.

"I have had quite enough of you and your ways," proceeded Mrs. Hart, with deliberate emphasis. "You and I cannot agree, and the sooner we settle our differences the better. I give you until ten o'clock to-morrow to get out of this house."

"Oh, Mrs. Hart!"

It was a weak, frightened exclamation from Nathaniel Grafton, but he was totally unheeded by the leading parties to the discussion. By the advice of Gideon, his sister had been keeping herself in check for the time being, but she was stirred up too much now to continue. Her black eyes flashed with evil light, and she took a sudden step toward Mrs. Hart.

"You order me out? You?"

"Yes."

"I will not go."

"Then you will be put out by an officer."

"You dare not; he dares not!" and she again indicated Grafton.

"We dare; we will!"

"Woman, do you know why we are here? Do you know the claim we have on yonder man?"

"What is your claim?"

"That of right. Maybe you think you know all about him. Maybe you think because you sweep the dust up in his house that you can as easily guess his past. Look ye, woman, the noble householder has not always been living in the walled city. He has dwelt in the wilds and breathed the same air as the despised gypsy. He has eaten the gypsy's food, slept in the gypsy's wagon, and traveled where the gypsy went. There is more. You wonder why we are under his roof—"

"I have not said that I wonder," interrupted Mrs. Hart.

"I will tell you. Once I had a daughter. She was of the gypsy blood that the American despises so much, but she was handsome as the red rose that grows wild in the open fields, and as good as the best of the boastful Americans. She was of noble figure, and her mind was the equal of the proud race I hate."

"Kyzelia, Kyzelia!" muttered Grafton.

"Ay, Kyzelia," returned Gormora. "Such was her name—beautiful Kyzelia! He remembers it; he knows it well. He met her; he loved her; he married her!"

"Kyzelia, Kyzelia!" muttered Nathaniel, weakly.

"What was the end? He was rich, proud, dishonorable. He soon tired of his

gypsy wife and cast her off. He fled to the houses of his people; he deserted his gypsy wife. She died! What else?"

With fierce impetuosity Gormora waved her hand toward Grafton, and he muttered the name again in the same weak way. Mrs. Hart stood firm. She betrayed neither surprise nor agitation.

"If you would know how Kyzelia looked," proceeded the female gypsy, "cast your eyes upon Zarah. She is daughter of Kyzelia; she is my granddaughter; she is—"

The bony arm that pointed to Grafton quivered, and the speaker's face twitched convulsively as she added:

"She is Nathaniel Grafton's daughter!"

"Yes," added Gideon, harshly, "Zarah is daughter of Grafton."

Tommy Fogg stood bewildered. It seemed that heirs were pressing each other in the case, and that his claim, even if he had been what was asserted, was not of the best sort. To him the fact that Grafton had yielded so supinely to the gypsies was now explained, and he realized that the old gentleman must give up or enter upon a stubborn fight.

Mrs. Hart did not seem to feel shocked or worried by the last assertion, and her answer was ready.

"Can you prove this?" she demanded, in a business-like way.

"Ask him!" and Gormora pointed to Nathaniel.

"I ask you."

"We can prove it all. Zarah has been with us all of her life."

"Why not with her father?"

"He deserted the child at the same time he left its mother."

"And why have you waited all this while to present the child's claim?"

"We have never known where the father was. When Kyzelia died we searched long and far for him. Among other places, we came here to New York, but there was no clew. He had called himself John Hughes when among us; we knew nothing of Nathaniel Grafton. We never knew of him until the night when we played burglars and broke in here, thus becoming inmates of his house and introducing his daughter to him."

"I am not going to pass upon your claim. Do you expect him to acknowledge the girl?"

"Yes."

"Why should he? Its mother was a gypsy."

"She was his wife."

"But not his equal. You cannot expect him to acknowledge her."

Gormora lost her temper again. She moved closer to Mrs. Hart, and Tommy Fogg expected to see her spring upon her in true tigress fashion. Her eyes told of wild fury.

"What are you to say this?" snarled Gormora. "Cur of the Americans, you wash the dishes of the house as a servant. What are you to judge of Kyzelia?"

"I judge her by her relatives!"

The rashness of the woman was amazing, and her retort nearly gave the female gypsy a convulsion. Gideon, however, moved to her aid.

"Look ye, housekeeper," he growled, "this will not do. You fight us. Good! Have it out, but do it on fair lines. No more of insult, or we will kill you where you stand. The gypsies carry knives; they know how to use them. Beware how you meddle with their hate."

"And do you think," cried Mrs. Hart, "that nobody but you have hates to revenge? Dotards! you do not know me as well as I do you. Am I a lump of ice, to be beaten by the waves of your fury and give no sign? Have I no past? Has nobody wronged me? Have I nothing to revenge? Have I no cause to feel hate? Fool, fool! you do not know me; you do not know the merciless wrong that has been done me! Do you threaten me? Don't dare to do it! don't dare, or you may all be dead inside of the hour!"

A remarkable change had taken place in Mrs. Hart. She was no longer cool and calm. Something had stirred her up strangely, and it was a tremendous passion that was aroused. Her eyes glittered

with light that equalled that of Gormora's own, and her very frame seemed shaken by the upheaval.

It was a complete surprise to Tommy Fogg, who thought:

"This woman is a marvel; she has hidden a heart of fire under an exterior of ice. She has a past, indeed, and it seems to connect with the swarthy gypsies. What is the mystery? What has been the history of this remarkable woman?"

The Lees were not a little affected by the outbreak, but they were accustomed to passionate manifestations, and they quickly regained their composure.

"You threaten us!" exclaimed Gideon. "Good! We are ready to fight it out with you in any way you wish. Let it be so."

He whipped out his knife, but Tommy Fogg moved forward, and, for the first time, broke his silence.

"Stop!" he ordered. "You are a coward to draw a weapon on a woman. Replace it! There must be no fighting here."

"Ha! do you see who says this?" cried Gormora. "It is—"

"Silence!"

Gideon, always the cooler of the gypsy pair, broke in just as his sister was about to utter the name of Korgan Murch, and an imperious gesture checked her further speech. He turned his sullen eyes again upon Thomas Fogg.

"You heard us threatened. We take that from nobody. If fight is wanted, let it begin."

"The first threat was from your side. If anybody is to blame it is Gormora. You come here as robbers, and then try to bully the woman who catches you. It will not work. I fight for her!"

Mrs. Hart looked momentarily surprised; then she quietly produced a revolver and slipped it into Tommy's hand.

"Take it," she directed. "I have another here!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A NEW ALLIANCE.

In a moment more the situation was materially changed. Mrs. Hart and Thomas each held a revolver, and the gypsies looked far less inclined to press hostilities. They gazed at the weapons and then at each other, and for a while nothing was said. The pair opposed to them waited patiently, and Mr. Grafton cowered on the bed as usual. It seemed that emergencies had the effect of taking away the little force of character he ordinarily possessed.

The pause was growing striking, when Gideon suddenly turned to his sister with the terse suggestion:

"Let us go! Come!"

He turned toward the door, but Gormora hesitated. The revolvers had a voice of their own, and she did not wish to try them further, but she was equally reluctant to surrender to the woman who was humbling her so decisively. Finally she moved to follow Gideon's example.

"You shall hear from us again," she muttered, in a voice as deep as a man's.

"Be careful how you let yourself be heard from," cried Mrs. Hart, warningly.

Gormora appeared inclined to reopen the quarrel, but she thought better of it. Scowling slightly, she shrugged her shoulders and passed over the threshold. In utter silence she and Gideon tramped up the stairs to their own quarters.

The trio in the other room were left to themselves. There was a brief lull, and then Mrs. Hart slowly turned her eyes upon Thomas.

"Your offer of aid was timely," she remarked, briefly.

"I am glad if I have been of service," he replied.

"I see you do not sympathize with the gypsies."

"I know of no reason why I should. They are lawbreakers, and I infer, thieves caught in the act. My duty was plain."

"They came here to rob. They are inmates of the house—unwelcome ones, as you must realize—but they are not satisfied with that. Their instincts are so thoroughly those of thieves that they cannot keep quiet under the best of circumstances."

Breaking off suddenly, she went to Nathaniel Grafton's side.

"You can get rest now," she added, her firm voice growing gentle. "The danger is over. I will see that they do not come again."

Nathaniel looked at her, seemed about to speak, glanced at Tommy, and then settled down more comfortably in bed.

"Leave me," he answered, faintly. "I want to be alone. I am tired; I want to rest."

It was a weary, hopeless voice and manner, and Tommy's sympathies were more keenly aroused for him than ever before. He went closer to the bed.

"Sleep in peace," he directed. "I will stand guard in the hall, if need be, and see that you are not intruded upon again. Those dusky wretches must be made to keep their hands off. I will guard you until morning."

Mrs. Hart surveyed the speaker sharply.

"Can you, will you do this?" she asked.

"Gladly."

"Your offer will not be refused. I do not believe there will be any further outbreak to-night, but they must be warded off. Mr. Grafton must be protected. Do you really mean to ally yourself with his interests and protect him?"

Thomas flushed. It was very clear that she had no faith in him; no belief in his claim to be heir of the house, but it was a time that help was needed. He felt a rush of manly purpose, and his reply was quick and firm:

"I am ready to do all I can in the case. I ask no confidences, but merely offer my help. Whatever I can do shall be done freely, and to the best of my ability."

He was at his best then, and Mrs. Hart's face expressed a degree of approval she had not before shown him at any time.

"Your offer is accepted," she responded. "You shall be his protector for the night; I will see to it to-morrow. You will not need to keep watch in the hall, however; the connecting door shall be unlocked and kept open, and thus you can remain in your own room, and yet hear all sounds. It shall be so."

Her hand rested lightly on Nathaniel's brow for a moment, as she would have touched a suffering child, but Grafton knew it not. His eyes had closed, and, strangely enough, he was sinking into slumber in the very moment of the excitement.

"He is very much broken," she murmured.

"He will be more so if those black-skinned demons are allowed to remain."

"It is not so bad as it might be. Nathaniel Grafton has not the mental capacity to feel as he would once. He becomes frightened, he grieves, but it is the passing grief of a weakened mind. Possibly it is better so for him, but our duty becomes all the more imperative. We guard one who cannot guard himself."

"Let it be well done," quickly returned Thomas. "For my part I will gladly protect him as far as possible. I ask nothing in return. Heirs are crowding around his bedside, it seems. I know not the merits of any of them, but this I can say: I am ready to defend him from the unworthy and vicious, and if any worthy person has a better right here than I, I am more than willing to surrender my position in this house and go my way when I am no longer needed."

It was a statement made with a motive. Thomas knew that Mrs. Hart did not believe in his claim to the identity of Oswald Clarendon. Her scepticism had made him more than ever out of love with his false position, and he was trying now to make her understand in a guarded way that he was ready to yield his stolen honors as heir.

If she did not understand it was not because she was inattentive. Her gaze was so keen that it seemed to penetrate his very mind, and when he ceased speaking she nodded quietly.

"I think we comprehend each other," she observed, just as quietly. "Be a friend to Nathaniel Grafton, and I will be your friend."

"Consider it a bargain."

He spoke promptly, and drew himself up to higher stature. All this might result to his injury in some ways, but his manhood was aroused. He would fight for this old man and his strange woman protector.

Mrs. Hart was not one to grow enthusiastic, even where she believed fully, and she gave him no more of promising words, but her voice had a different pitch as she finished giving directions for the night. He had seen her aggressive and icy calm, and, later, full of fire. Now, she was showing that she could be womanly and gentle, and he grew to have a better opinion of her.

The connecting door was unlocked, and then, with the understanding that Mrs. Hart was to retire and secure needed rest, the impostor went to his own room. He found Ai Skinner awake and frightened.

"Are you really alive?" asked the circus man. "I listened to it all through the keyhole. Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, how dared you run the risk of getting shot? You are horribly reckless, and you will yet leave me unprotected, with nobody to plant the buttercups on my grave when I am killed by the gypsies."

The impostor gave Ai one indignant glance, and then, ignoring him, began to pace the room restlessly.

"The case broadens," he mused. "There are more important affairs than my villainous deception, and they will be attended to now. I may be arrested for killing the man on the pier, or the gypsies may do the job for me, but I am going to fight like a man from this out—fight for Nathaniel Grafton and the strange woman who is his staff and his protector. If I die it shall be like a man. No more will I pose, here or elsewhere, as a worthless vagabond. From this time I am not the Tommy Fogg that Ai has known—I am Thomas Fogg, name of dignity and man of ambition and purpose!"

He had been told that he could safely sleep, since the connecting door was to be open, but this he did not do. It was three o'clock, and he sat down to pass the time strictly on guard.

There was no more to do that night. The gypsies had failed in their effort to rob Grafton, and they evidently felt that further attempts that night would be useless. They kept their rooms, and all was peaceful around the premises.

When he heard the family astir, Thomas, for the first time, ventured to lie down. Arousing Ai, who was sleeping, in spite of his fears, the impostor took his turn, and obtained an hour's sleep before the breakfast hour.

Here, again, Mrs. Hart's judgment was seen. She gave the Lees the dining-room alone, and in the back parlor set another table for Mr. Grafton and Thomas. Thus another meeting of the hostile forces was deferred. Fogg expected to see the gypsies expelled, but this was not done, nor did he see anything that pointed to it. Grafton, with his peculiar changes from better to worse and then back again, was quite bright and cheerful, and the breakfast passed off naturally.

An hour later Thomas and Ai were in the former's private room, when the valet sounded a note of alarm.

"There comes that horrible detective," he exclaimed, as he looked out of the window.

"To put us under the rack, I suppose," replied Thomas.

But the detective did not come up, or send for them, and it dawned upon the impostor that he must be closeted with somebody else. He explained this belief to Ai, creating fresh alarm.

"He is with Grafton, giving us away!" cried Ai.

CHAPTER XVII.

SECRET EMOTION IS SHOWN.

Joseph Chester was not with Grafton, as the impostor feared. It was Maggie who opened the door for him, and she appeared to know why he had come.

"Please go into the parlor, sir," she requested. "I will speak to Mrs. Hart at once."

"Anything new, Maggie?" the Secret Service Expert asked.

"I think there was some ruction here last night, but I haven't caught onto it yet. I guess it was nothing serious."

Maggie slept in the basement, so she did not have a chance to know what was done up-stairs during the night, and she was honest in this reply. She went to call Mrs. Hart, and the housekeeper soon made her appearance. Joseph rose and bowed politely.

"You have my message, I suppose?" he began.

"Yes, and the girl has told me a good deal. You are a detective who has been employed by the Harper family?"

"Yes. They were next of kin, or so supposed themselves, until Oswald Clarendon was produced."

"I understand. They do not like to lose their money."

"We may absolve them of all selfishness in the case, madam. That they did, and do, want to inherit Grafton's money, is beyond dispute—we are all built the same way, and nobody wants to yield cash that he thinks belongs to him. The Harpers, however, do not want to contest this matter with Oswald Clarendon. What they do want is to know whether the man who claims to be Clarendon is what he asserts. It is to settle this, one way or another, that I am in this case. I believed you might help me."

"How?"

"I have talked freely with Maggie, and she has mentioned much that has occurred here. She informs me that you are not in sympathy with the claim of this Oswald Clarendon."

"How does she know that?"

"Did not you and he have a meeting less than cordial?"

"As to that, I am only a housekeeper here."

"I ask for your aid as what you are."

"Then I will not cavil over the point. Well, I cannot say I am in sympathy with Oswald Clarendon."

"Do you believe he is here?"

"I will not deny that I suspect the claimant may be a fraud, since you are engaged to look up that very point."

"What evidence can you give me bearing on the point?"

"None."

"I had hoped for something better than this."

"I can only say that I doubt. The claimant does not look as I should expect Oswald Clarendon to look, and I doubt Levi Overbridge. You doubtless have been told that when Oswald, as a boy of fifteen, ran away from here, there was a rumor that he had been killed in a railroad accident. Some boy was thus killed, and it was suspected by some that it was Oswald, but the body was not recognizable. Nobody cared to look to it very closely. The boy was an orphan, and Mr. Grafton had always quarreled with him. He took little pains to prove or disprove the possibility that the boy might have been Oswald. Of course, I cannot say it was he, but the fact may be mentioned in connection with this new eruption. Oswald may have been dead these fifteen years."

"In any case, you doubt that the man who claims to be he is such?"

"I do doubt it."

"Will you aid me to settle the matter?"

"All I can do will be done willingly," calmly promised Mrs. Hart.

"You are situated where you can watch them all. Watch! Listen! Study! Trap them, if you can."

"Captain Clarendon is not the worst foe we have to fight."

"What do you mean?"

"I refer to the others who have come here—the dark-skinned gypsies. They represent a very different force. Clarendon may be a fraud, but he is not vicious in his way. The gypsies are venomous, dangerous, cunning and bound to make trouble. You know of their claim, I presume?"

"Only that they seem to have some secret hold on Mr. Grafton."

"They have divulged the secret of that

hold. It may not interest you, but I will explain it, for it vitally concerns the point. Who is to inherit Nathaniel Grafton's money? They claim to be heirs."

"They? Impossible! How could that be?"

"Do you remember that one of the party is a handsome girl? They assert that she is the daughter of Mr. Grafton."

Joseph had been calm and steady during this conversation. He was interested, as behooved a detective who had a client to look after, but nothing more. The last statement appeared to stir him up not a little. He lost the stolidity of the professional detective, and looked thoroughly interested and surprised.

"What crazy freak is this?" he demanded.

"I can only say that such is their claim."

"The gypsy girl his daughter? Ridiculous! But there must be some explanation that goes with the assertion."

"They claim that Mr. Grafton once came to their camp; that he met, fell in love with and married a certain Kyzelia Lee, daughter of old Gormora and niece of Gideon, of this gang."

"Preposterous!"

Joseph leaped to his feet and stood looking at Mrs. Hart in amazement. She was surprised to see how much his face expressed, and she thought, even then, that the opposition was fortunate to have an aid who took so much interest in his case. It was as if the detective had personal ends to be touched by the affair.

"Be that as it may," she answered, "this bold beauty, Zarah, is presented as the daughter of Nathaniel and Kyzelia."

"Surely he denies it."

"In a certain way. He does not deny that he once knew the dusky-skinned people. I believe he even admits that he knew Kyzelia, but he does deny the relationship to Zarah. It is well he does; if she is what they claim for her, she, not Oswald Clarendon, is heir to Grafton's money."

"Why, this is an outrageous claim! She, the daughter of Grafton! The mere thought is an outrage on common-sense. Suppose Mr. Grafton did know the gypsies. He surely did not marry this Kyzelia you speak of."

"I fear he did," admitted Mrs. Hart, steadily.

"Married a gypsy?"

"Yes."

"But the present young woman—this Zarah—"

Mrs. Hart rose and stood by Joseph's side. Her firmness had suddenly disappeared, and she betrayed strong emotion. She placed a hand on the detective's arm and spoke with intensity of feeling.

"A fraud—a counterfeit, I am sure, but I cannot prove it, and Nathaniel Grafton bends to the storm weakly. I cannot believe it. She, the swarthy child of gypsy blood, his daughter! Then may we all desert this accursed house and never enter its walls again. Nathaniel Grafton's whole life has been marked by errors of terrible meaning, but if the consequences live after him so strongly that his all goes to that black-skinned girl, his life has been more than a crime!"

Joseph gazed wonderingly at the speaker. He did not, could not, understand her fully, but there was enough on the surface to tell of more far down. He had been told that she was a faithful housekeeper, but that did not explain all, and he was perplexed by her stirring outbreak.

His thoughts were not all in the way of wonder, and he surprised Mrs. Hart in return by seizing her hand in a tenacious grasp.

"Well said!" he cried. "This vile thing must not be. It would be no less than sacrilege to let the wealth of this old family go to the gypsies. It must be prevented; it shall be prevented. I swear to devote my time to it until the work is done—ay, if necessary I'll give all my life to upsetting this game. I swear it!"

Mrs. Hart's eyes opened wider, and she gazed at Joseph in momentary bewilderment. She knew nothing of detectives,

but she was impressed with the belief that this was a remarkable specimen of the profession.

"You feel deeply," she murmured.

Chester dropped her hand abruptly. Embarrassment showed in face and manner.

"I am a man of deep feeling," he muttered, "and the plight of this old man appeals to me."

"The feeling does you honor."

"I trust I am not destitute of pity."

"Is it an emotion common to detectives?"

"Remember, I am a private detective."

"I had forgotten it."

"At least, I am not on the ordinary force. That may account for my interest. In any case, I am bound to help Grafton out of this."

"Poor Nathaniel Grafton!"

"Poor Grafton? Not so! He deserves no word of sympathy—it is not for him that I feel. Only for the family name and money—money collected by honest men through several generations—I would have no part in this. Poor Grafton? I don't look at it that way. It seems he found congenial associates among the gypsies; he must have known with whom to flock. Leaving that out, he has been a disgrace to the name he bears. A low, weak, unmanly, despicable wretch!"

Sudden fire blazed in Mrs. Hart's eyes.

"Stop!" she exclaimed, impetuously. "I will not listen to you; I will not allow you to speak thus. Weak he may have been—wrong he surely has done—but he has been kind and thoughtful, too. If you knew him well you would not condemn him as you do. Pity his faults, for he had not a well-balanced intellect, but do not be severe in condemning him. I will not allow it!"

The ice was all gone in her manner, and the fire was not alone in her eyes. She was a stout defender, and Joseph again felt deeply perplexed and surprised. Housekeeper she might be, but it did not explain all this. At that moment she united the passion of the tigress with the tragic intensity of a mistress of stage portraiture.

She caught the wonder expressed in his regard, and suddenly came out of her mood. Confusion and something like embarrassment struggled awhile for the mastery, and then she smiled and was her old self.

"Excuse me," she added, quietly. "I fear I am too vehement, but I have long been a servant of Mr. Grafton's, and I cannot see him wronged and feel no emotion."

"Your loyalty does you honor," answered the detective, gravely.

"Loyalty!"

She sighed as she repeated the word, and her companion was more than ever at a loss to know what it all meant. Then she again and permanently cast off her depression and added steadily:

"You and I propose a union to beat off the sharks that menace Nathaniel Grafton. Shall it be so?"

"Speaking for myself, yes."

"And I," she exclaimed quickly, "will not be backward. We will fight the rival forces to the end. It is a compact!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THOMAS AND HIS WEAPONS.

After some further conversation it was arranged that the headquarters special should see Mr. Grafton and secure his formal consent to the engagement of the detective to try and drive the gypsies from the house. Nothing was said by either Mrs. Hart or Chester about beating off the man who claimed to be Oswald Clarendon, but Joseph was not unmindful of the advantage it would give him in that case by getting full sway against the gypsies.

According to this plan, Grafton was seen. He was as timid as ever, and fearful of the consequences of a struggle against the Lees, but Mrs. Hart was there to reassure him and direct his mental decisions. As a result he finally acquiesced, and the detective received permission to work in his behalf, and seek to baffle the

gypsies in such a way that no trouble would come of their efforts in opposition.

This having been done, Joseph gave his mind to another subject. By becoming Grafton's representative in the one matter, he gained access to the house and many privileges not before his. He intended to use this to manage the so-called Captain Clarendon, and get closer to him, and he sought for a chance to speak with him.

Chance favored him, and when he met Thomas Fogg in the hall he asked him to step into the parlor. Thomas looked worried by this call, and so he was. Had the detective new evidence, and was he to be arrested for killing the man on the pier?

Chester made no haste to put him out of suspense. There was a considerable pause, and then the detective opened:

"Matters seem to be in a serious state around here."

"I am not responsible for it," replied Thomas, curtly.

"Still, you must feel worried by it."

"Why the dickens do you care about that fellow? Men are plenty. What is one gone, even if he was murdered?"

"There is logic in that. Perhaps it is just as well to agree with you that the man killed on the pier need not trouble us."

"I see no reason why he should. He was a person of ordinary rank in life, you have told me. What do we care about him? My way would be to drop the whole thing."

"Are you not curious, Captain Clarendon, to know how he happened to be murdered so near your schooner?"

"Not a bit. Bury the knave, and then let it rest."

"You use the blunt, practical wisdom of a sailor, but there is no occasion for following the argument up now. When you surmised that I wished to speak of the murder you got wholly on the wrong track. I never dreamed of speaking of it."

Thomas flushed a little. He was afraid of the detective, and not pleased to have taken so naturally to the subject himself, when it was not introduced by Chester.

"You said," he replied, with some awkwardness, "that there was a serious state of affairs."

"True. I referred to your hope of inheriting Grafton's money."

"What do you know about my hope?" asked Thomas, irritably.

"You claim to be his heir."

"Claim, sir? Claim?"

The impostor was belligerent, expecting immediate trouble, but the detective did not get stirred up in the least. Composedly, he added:

"But now come others who make claims that will put yours out of joint if allowed to go on."

"Oh! you refer to the gypsies?"

"Just so."

"Yes, they do seem to be flush with claims."

"If the girl Zarah is a daughter of Grafton, where do your prospects of inheriting his money come in?"

Thomas smiled with real ease, at last.

"In that case they would not come in. A daughter antedates a second cousin, once removed, so the law says. Yes, if Zarah is what is claimed for her, all I have to do is to pack my grip and get out of this. Simple enough."

"Surely, you won't give up easily."

It was Joseph's turn to feel surprised, and the happy face of his companion put him at fault.

"I can't say as to that," answered Thomas. "All depends upon how quickly and decisively she proves her claim. I am ready to skip whenever her claim is proven."

"Would you yield to a gypsy?"

"Sure, if she was legal heir. Fact is, I feel that justice ought to be done all men and women. If I am heir here I shall hold on to it like grim death—"

"Do you think you are that?" bluntness interrupted the detective.

"Yes. I don't yet give up hope to the dark-skinned girl. Why, I can't tolerate the notion that the property should go into such base hands."

"You ought not to have run away when you were around here fifteen years ago."

"I was only a boy then. Mr. Grafton was quick and peppery, and prone to forget that he had ever been a boy himself. I cared as little for his money then as I do now, so I just skipped. Wouldn't you have done the same thing?"

"Possibly, though I can't say positively. Anyhow, we must all combine to drive off the Lees."

"I am at your service if I can do anything. Command me."

"Do you know the temper of the gypsies?"

"Well, I ought to, after what I have seen."

"As an inmate of the house, you will be constantly where you may be called upon to act as protector to Nathaniel Grafton or others. Are you prepared for it?"

Thomas took from his pocket first a revolver, and then a knife. He laid them on the table.

"That will do something," he remarked, quietly.

The Secret Service Expert picked up the knife.

"That's an odd-looking weapon," he remarked.

"I had it on shipboard. Got it in the West Indies when on a cruise to that section."

"A sweep of it would take a life without much doubt. I would as soon be hit by a sword. An ugly-looking blade, by Jove!"

Thomas laughed and replaced it.

"That has killed many a man," he remarked. "I had it from a native, and he told stirring stories of its history. Sailors pick up such things, you know."

The truth was that Thomas had "picked it up" in the Bowery. With trouble threatening from the gypsies, he had thought it advisable to be prepared for difficulties that might occur. He had purchased both a knife and a revolver, and, simply because his past experience had been so much connected with that thoroughfare, he had gone to the Bowery to get, second-hand, what he wanted.

Now he told a falsehood, not from any evil motive, but simply because he thought that his role of a sailor demanded something of the sort.

"You should be able to hold your own with that," added Chester. "See to it that you don't let the gypsies outwit you. Is your valet similarly armed?"

"No. We may as well leave Al Skinner out of it; he is not a man of war. Just at this moment he is off riding the bicycle. His companion, I regret to say, is Zarah, the gypsy girl. She has let herself loose in her new circle of life, and become ambitious to manage a wheel. Al has seen some experience in that line, so he has equipped himself with a sweater and taken to the road with her. I presume they are evoking wonder in Central Park now. Al may as well go unarmed; he never was cut out for a fighter."

"I have a notion to see this hot-headed Gormora. She must not get the notion that she is queen and ruler here. If I thought she would come I would summon her here."

Just as the words passed his lips the door opened, and Gormora walked in. Her manner could not have been calmer, and she nodded steadily to Chester.

"Don't think but I will come," she spoke, "I am here. What do you want of me?"

The detective was taken aback for a moment. The effrontery of the woman was striking, and the fact apparent that she had acted the listener at the door. As if to meet the thought in his mind she went on, and the brief coolness before shown soon vanished.

"I have heard something of what you said here, but I was too late to get the good of it. What's all this talk about my Zarah, and why do you want to see me? I am hotheaded, am I? What ails you all, anyhow?"

Gormora's manner indicated that she spoke the truth when she said she had

heard but little, and that probably meant that she had been too late to listen to the talk of the knife and revolver, so the detective reasoned.

He rallied to meet the woman, and have a decisive talk with her.

"Since you ask the question, madam, there has been talk about Zarah. You claim that she is Grafton's daughter?"

"She is."

"Prove it!"

"What?"

"Mere words are cheap. I call upon you to offer something more substantial. A fortune cannot be heired by idle assertion. Back up your claim if you can. Prove that Zarah is what you claim!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TIGRESS AT BAY.

Gormora threw her head back imperiously. She was not young or prepossessing, but she had a way that was dramatic without any intention on her part of being so. No adult would ever laugh at her, bony and unclean though she was, when the pose of her barbarian figure and the flash of her barbarian eyes were seen.

"I have nothing to prove," she snapped, angrily.

"Then you will have nothing to inherit," coolly retorted Chester.

"What?"

"If you were more civilized you would understand that the law requires absolute proof of such amazing claims as yours. Giving no heed to courts and judges, let me say that we call for proof. Prove that Zarah is what you say!"

"Isn't my word enough?"

"Decidedly not."

Venomously the barbarian eyes flashed, and Gormora took two impetuous steps toward the detective. Thomas Fogg thought that an attack was intended, but Joseph remained as cool as ever. Gormora had something to say; he waited to hear it.

"Dog of an American!" she hissed, "I spit in your face! I scorn your miserable insults! The gypsy is far above the slimy snake that crawls and cringes and has no voice save when there is a rich person to hire him. Bah! I hate your sort!"

"Presuming that you intend to make me out a sort of menagerie, with dog-like and snake-like attributes, united in one frail frame, let me remark that this is not what we are talking about. It does not matter what I am, for I do not claim anything from Nathaniel Grafton. I am not ambitious to be any man's heir. Well, about Zarah. Prove your claim! Prove that she is Grafton's daughter."

"He admits it."

"My understanding is that he denies it."

"Why, we all know him. He came to our camp, met Kyzelia, and married her. He admits it."

"That is not the point. I believe it is admitted that he did all this. Prove that Zarah is his child."

Gormora had been impressed by the speaker's steady way, but his persistence now angered her afresh.

"Look ye," she shrilly cried, "I will prove it when I please, and not before!"

"Just as I suspected," replied Chester, with icy calmness. "It is clear that you have nothing to prove, but that you hold on here by trying to bluff Nathaniel Grafton. Your refusal to prove anything shows there can be no proof; it shows that Zarah is not what is asserted for her. She is a cheat, and we know how to deal with such persons. We will have you out of this house quickly."

The threat had effect. Instead of getting into fresh fury, Gormora assumed a thoughtful air.

"Do you think it is easy to get witnesses?" she asked. "Our witnesses must be among the wandering people, and they do not live in houses like the Americans, nor long in one place. No gypsy knows at the rising of the sun where he will rest the coming night, nor who will be his camp-mates. Year after year he goes, comes, marches, and countermarches, until his trail crosses and recrosses many

times. Where his fellow-gypsies have gone he never knows, unless he runs upon one of them. I have brothers and sisters without number, but I know not where any are but Gideon. We are a wandering people. Think you it is easy to find witnesses among such?"

"You talk well, but with that we have nothing to do. Proof is what we call for."

"Yes," added Thomas Fogg, with what proved to be rash anxiety to have his say, "that is all that counts. No heirs are admitted without due credentials."

Gormora flamed up again. She started forward, and, shaking her hand in Fogg's face, angrily cried:

"You want it all to yourself, but you will have nothing. I will beat you out if it takes a lifetime. You pose as heir of the old man, but your plots will fail. I will beggar you!"

Thomas fell back a little, but Chester mildly answered:

"How can you do that?"

"He is no heir!"

"What do you mean?"

"She sees only her own candidate," hurriedly interposed Thomas.

"I have listened," exclaimed Gormora. "I know there is something wrong here. Why does the servant of this man call him Tommy Fogg? He calls himself Captain Clarendon. How many names has he?"

The impostor felt that his color was changing suspiciously.

"My servant is a poor, weak-minded fellow," he explained, trying to be cool, but making a failure of it. "He is full of a sort of good-natured nonsense that he believes is humor. He may call me anything if he takes the notion."

"You explain too much," retorted Gormora. "No innocent person does that. You, sir," to Joseph, "if you set yourself up as guardian of the Grafton fortune—look well to this sleek claimant."

"Nonsense!" cried Thomas, hot and uncomfortable.

"Quite right," agreed Chester. "Captain Clarendon's position here is not in doubt."

"She says all this just to take attention off of herself," pursued Thomas, still eager to explain. "For myself, I am ready to yield my position in this house the moment that any other person's claim is shown to be better than mine. I do not intend to do it to a rival who does no more than make wild assertions that can't be proven."

Gormora's barbarian eyes were glittering their worst. Her fingers worked convulsively, and it looked as if she longed to leap upon Thomas and grip his throat with her strong hands.

"Snake, meddler, reptile!" she hissed. "You shall pay for this. I will make you a beggar!"

"How will you do it? Not by producing an heir on whose side there is no justice," replied Thomas, dramatically.

"We will see if you will scoff at me."

With this Gormora stalked out of the room like a soldier. Chester and Thomas looked at each other. They had the impression that the interview was not over, but they did not catch the idea she was working upon until she suddenly reappeared with Nathaniel Grafton in her company—it would not be inappropriate to say in her tow, for she was almost dragging him along. She marched him into the room without ceremony, and set him before the younger men with a vicious air.

Nathaniel was not firm under this presentation; he never was when Gormora took charge. He feared her, and when she showed the iron hand the iron in his nature all went out. He was now about as weak as when she had made her night raids upon him, and he gave only a brief glance at the other men, and then turned his eyes piteously upon Gormora.

"I want you to speak here," she declared, in jerky sentences. "It may not be necessary for you to tell these captious gentlemen who you are or whom I am, but all else should be stated. When did you first see me?"

Nathaniel's lips moved, but he made no audible reply.

"Did you come to the gypsy camp some twenty years ago?" she pursued, sharply.

"Yes."

"Was I there? Was Gideon Lee there?"

"Yes."

"Who else?"

"Many of the gypsies."

"Was Kyzelia there?"

"She was," replied Nathaniel, with a sigh.

"Did you tarry at our camp; did you act as one of us for several months? Did you not eat, drink and sleep among the gypsies. Did you not keep our company to your pleasure, and did we share all we had with you?"

"It was so," Nathaniel admitted.

"Where did this take place?"

"It was far up toward the Adirondacks, in the country around Lake George. I know no more. We wandered all over that region while I was with you, and up along the Mohawk River."

"Was Kyzelia there? Did you seek her company all you could?"

"Yes."

"Did you love the beautiful gypsy girl? Did you marry her?"

Grafton sighed and his head dropped. It was the worst question of all, and he was reluctant to reply. He was not permitted to dally over it. Gormora swooped down upon him, hawk-like. Her gaunt figure towered above him, ugly, yet impressive. Her voice rang out with clearness unusual to it.

"Speak!" she cried. "Did you marry Kyzelia Lee?"

"Pity me, I did!" groaned Grafton.

Gormora turned upon the listeners.

"Are you satisfied?" she demanded.

"You have told nothing," coldly answered Chester. "The point is not in anything you have drawn out. We care not whether such things are true. The real issue is, whose child is Zarah?"

The gypsy wheeled and again towered over Nathaniel. She seized his arm tightly, and, lowering her lofty head, glared into his eyes. It occurred to Thomas that she was seeking to carry Grafton's will by the force of her own headlong nature.

"Speak," she pursued, in her deepest voice. "We want to know the truth and you must speak out. Let there be no more dallying. Is Zarah your daughter?"

CHAPTER XX.

A BLOW IS STRUCK.

Thomas Fogg's gaze wandered to the face of the Secret Service Expert. He was reluctant to let this scene go on, and he needed but a sign of encouragement from Chester to cause him to interrupt. Chester, however, was as impassive as a rock, it seemed, and the leading actors of the drama were left to themselves.

Grafton was not quick with his reply, and Gormora imperiously added:

"Speak! These noble gentlemen await your word."

"I—I would rather not say," weakly responded Grafton.

"I demand an answer!" cried Gormora. "There has been too much of beating about the bush. I hold an uncertain position in this house; I will hold it no longer. Out with your reply. Speak, or I'll make you suffer for your silence. Is Zarah your daughter?"

"She—is! Yes!"

Chester had waited with ill-concealed impatience. Knowing as much as he did, he was well aware that the old man could not reply intelligently to the authoritative question, and he did not intend to let Gormora have such full sway as she desired. When the response was out he would have interrupted with cool logic, but Thomas was ahead of him. The impostor moved swiftly nearer the leaders of the drama, and broke in warmly:

"Enough of this farce! There shall be no more of it, for Nathaniel Grafton is not friendless. Woman, we have had enough of you. Be silent, or suffer the consequences."

"Ah! but the noble Nathaniel has ad-

mitted everything!" triumphantly cried gypsy.

"How? Under what pressure?" demanded Thomas warmly. "You led him on, you frightened him and warped his judgment. Such a confession from him amounts to nothing. It shall not be recorded against him."

"Is he not master of his own tongue? He has said that Zarah is his child, and I have a noble witness to the confession. Who governs Nathaniel's speech—you or himself?"

"Just now you governed it. Mr. Grafton is ill of body and weak of mind. Sickness has played its part with him, and he is not what he once was. He is not competent to make such an admission—his mind is a wreck. You shall not profit by his mental weakness. Come away!"

Thomas had lost his head. Even with Chester outwardly arrayed as his ally he did not forget that the detective was hunting for the murderer of the man killed on the pier; so, really, Chester was his enemy. Feeling compelled to hold his position in the house, it was also necessary to beat off the gypsies.

He laid violent hands on Gormora and sought to drag her away from Nathaniel, but he aroused a new element of trouble. Nathaniel was just as weak as had been asserted, but his pride all remained, and this plain statement of his mental condition angered him.

His clinched hand went up and he struck Thomas in the face.

"Back, dog!" he cried, hotly. "Dare to lay hands on my friends, and it will go hard with you. Crazy, am I? Well, I am sane enough to take care of Nathaniel Grafton. More, I can take care of you. At last I understand you! Knave, you are the same as when a meddlesome, impertinent boy, but I will baffle you! Think to inherit my money, do you? We will see! We will see! Ha! I will cut you off without a cent. I'll drive you out of my house. Crazy, am I? Ha! I am sane enough to beat you out. It's the old man's money you want; you are not willing a poor girl should share with you. Ha! there shall be no sharing—she shall have it all!"

This speech was fierce and headlong, and if it lacked in the firmness that a strong mind would have given it, it was made impressive by the vehemence the unfortunate man gave to it.

He shook his hand at the impostor, and seemed liable to assault him further.

Joseph looked on with calmness, seeing all, but content to let others have the lead. Especially did he notice Thomas just then. The blow had fallen more heavily on the latter than might have been thought. He rubbed the spot where the fist had caught him, and looked strangely pale as the savage speech was hurled at him.

The detective accounted for this by supposing he had repented of having been too hasty, but Gormora took a different view of it. She was delighted at having stirred up trouble, and her barbarian eyes glittered with triumph.

"Aha!" she cried, "the guilty feel the touch of the whip!"

"He shall feel it again!" declared Nathaniel.

"He is your heir, noble sir."

"I will drive him out; he shall inherit nothing of mine. Weak of mind, am I? Crazy, am I? Ha! We will see!"

"Noble sir," went on Gormora, solemnly, "beware of the man. See you the dark scowl on his face? He means you ill!"

"He can do nothing."

"He can kill."

"Kill?" echoed Nathaniel.

"Beware of the heir you would east off. He can kill!"

"Kill, kill? Would he kill me?" murmured Nathaniel, falling to trembling.

"My gypsy eyes are good at fortune-telling like those of all my people. I see a field of red, all red. Blood flows, flows, flows! Aha! Beware of the disappointed heir! Look to your life."

"Enough of this!" exclaimed Chester, sharply. "Your claim of skill as a fortune-teller comes at a poor time. You never asserted that you had the power until you

wanted to prejudice Mr. Grafton. Let us hear no more of it."

"My tongue is my own!" snapped Gormora.

"You will curb it. Keep the fact in mind that others can match you in trickery, if need be. Fight in the open, or you will lose even the ground you stand on."

"She stays in this house, sir!" cried Nathaniel.

"With that I have nothing to do now."

"Now?" echoed Gormora.

"And Oswald Clarendon goes out!" declared the old man.

"Mr. Grafton, we are all a bit excited, just now," soothingly remarked the detective. "We have let one thing and another run away with us. Suppose we drop this and rest on it?"

"A sea of red!" deeply uttered the gypsy. "I see it all—red, red, red! Beware of the man you have struck, noble sir—beware lest he strike you so you live not to know of the blow!"

It needed nothing to tell Joseph why she harped so much on her erratic fancy, but the cunning gleam in her eyes told a good deal. She was bound to influence Grafton further.

The detective moved forward to the pair.

"Let this stop," he commanded. "Woman, go to your place; it is not here. Mr. Grafton, kindly permit me to go with you to your private room. You and I may well look with contempt on these low quarrels."

"Right, sir," agreed Nathaniel. "It shall be so. We'll rest for now, but there is work to be done later. Yonder man, be he Captain Clarendon or a forecastle hand, goes from my house. He called me crazy and he struck me in the face."

"No, no!" interrupted Thomas, quickly. "I did not strike you—"

"I say you did, and for that I cast you off. Come, sir, come!"

He took Chester's arm, and they moved toward the door. The detective gave Thomas a meaning glance, and then they passed out. Thomas, still bewildered and agitated, was left with Gormora. She broke into a mocking laugh.

"How like you to fight the gypsy now?" she sneered. "Whose wits are proved the sharpest? Do you want to fight old Gormora again?"

"Woman, you are a devil!" the impostor exclaimed.

"A winning one."

"You would poison that man's mind."

"Who began it?"

"I fight fair."

"I fight to win, be the means what they may."

"I can well believe you, but don't forget that others can fight, too. You are carrying things with a high hand here, but Nathaniel Grafton is not the only man opposed to you. Be wise before you learn prudence through calamity. Let the old man have a decent show, or it will go hard with you."

Gormora broke into an unpleasant laugh.

"I need not fear you," she replied.

"Your own temper has put you out of the game, and I will see to it that Grafton does not forget your sneers. Weak-minded, is he? Ha, ha! He shall not forget!"

"Tigress!" Thomas exclaimed. "You do, indeed, use any and all means to reach your ends."

"You have not seen me fight yet. When you do it may surprise you. The gypsy has claws. Beware of them!"

She had been moving toward the door while speaking, and she now walked out abruptly.

Shortly after Joseph Chester returned and found Thomas standing alone, his expression moody and absent.

"Worried?" asked the detective, lightly.

"I suppose I have earned Mr. Grafton's undying ill-will."

"He may forget it."

"Not with the accursed gypsy to urge him on. Her malignant hatred will see that his enmity does not sleep. I was rash in my speech—very rash."

"It was a bad break, but very innocently made. You should have remembered, though, that Grafton would resent a ref-

erence to his mental condition. He knows he is afflicted in that way, so he cannot brook comments on it. However, don't worry over it."

"Mr. Chester, I want to get out of all this. I would rather be a wanderer again than heir to all of Grafton's money."

"Pining for the sea?"

"Pining for peace and freedom. If it were not for the gypsy thugs who are wearing his life out, I would leave Grafton to find another heir."

"Where would he find one with claim as good as yours?" asked the detective, watching Thomas closely.

"I know not; I care not. I want to wash my hands of it all."

"He may give you a chance. He threatened to cast you off, you know."

"Yes. Let it come. I hate my position here. I want to be free again. The money of the family is nothing to me; I despise it."

"Yet, you took it gladly when it was offered to you."

"My views have changed," moodily answered the impostor. "I've seen all I covet of this thing. Chester, beat off those gypsies and then I'll go too. There must be heirs after me—find them. Give them all. I want nothing!"

Thomas flung himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands. He seemed sincere, but the detective had no proof of it. His new departure might be a trick to impress the Secret Service Expert. Realizing this, the latter remained reserved, and the rest of the interview brought no addition to their confidences in each other.

The mine was not ready to spring. Joseph was willing to wait.

CHAPTER XXI.

WANTED IN A DARK ALLEY.

When Special Chester reached home he found a note awaiting him. It was one that interested him not a little, and when night had again fallen he took his way to South Street. At a place named in the note he found Craps Mulligan waiting, and smoking a particularly bad cigar. Craps had discarded the bandages that once ornamented his head, but this had not made any great addition to his appearance. Craps had a face of the sort commonly called "tough," and, though he was not so bad by far as his face indicated, he never would have passed as a missionary in the region he frequented.

His rugged face lighted up with pleasure when he saw the detective.

"So yer've come!" he greeted. "Didn't know whether the cobweb I sent would touch yer or not."

"It came all right. Hope I have not kept you waiting?"

"You're on time, anyhow, an' I give yer the glad hand. There is biz on foot. See?"

"You wrote that you had learned something new."

"I've found a man who will swear that the feller killed on the pier was the captain of the 'Smilin' Sally.'"

"Swear to it, eh? He puts it strongly."

"That's the size of it. You see, he went on board to deliver a dozen o' beer. They was ordered an' was ter be sent, but Snip Connors, he does the polite ter customers; and he carried them on board hisself. Didn't get no thanks, though, fer everybody there seemed ter be grouty because he did deliver the dozen."

"Who is this Snip Connors?"

"Friend o' mine—works in a beer-pond."

"What can he tell?"

"Go an' see him. He tells too much ter be had second-hand. Brace him yourself an' you'll get yer thinker full. Shall we canter around an' pump him?—he's ready to flow."

"If you say he can tell enough to make it pay. You know my needs."

"Boss, between you an' me, jest see Snip. He has the whole biz on ice from figger-head ter stern."

The detective had learned to have faith in Craps, and he needed no more urging. They went to the place where Snip was to be found. It was not the sort of place a decent man would naturally choose to

pass his time, though there were others not so fastidious, and they were there. It was a saloon, big and spreading, and Snip was just rolling out a cask to be elevated and used by the patrons of the resort.

When he had a hull in business he was duly introduced to Joseph.

"On the dead quiet, I do know the mug who was murdered on the pier," he abruptly remarked.

"You mean that you saw him on the 'Smiling Sally,' eh?"

"I seen him there, yes."

"What did he seem to be?"

"They called him Captain Clarendon."

"Who called him so?"

"The other two men."

"Who were they?"

"One was a little feller, all dried up, an' lookin' like a clerk who had gone ter seed, or mebbe a lawyer, or a preacher. Oldish feller, with the meat all gone from his bones an' his blood dried up."

It was not hard to recognize Lawyer Levi from this description.

"The other feller," added Snip, "I knew well. It was Barney Lyons. I've seen him many's the time before."

"Which one of this party was it that seemed to resent your coming to the schooner?"

"All o' them, but especially the old, dried-up bloke. He asked me quite cranky who told me ter bring it, saying they had only ordered it ter be made ready when they called. Fact is, boss, there's somethin' crooked about the whole biz. That so-called Captain Clarendon wasn't no more a captain than I be."

"No? How do you know that?"

"Why, I've seen him many's the time before. He used ter trot around the Bowery, mostly, but it wasn't no more than a week before I seen him on the schooner that he was in here, had a beer with two other men, an' I heerd him say he had been lookin' fer a chance ter ship."

"What, and he captain of the 'Smiling Sally'?"

"That's the crooked of it. How did he get ter be captain so quick when he had jest been out of a job an' walkin' on his shoestrings?"

"You may be mistaken in your man."

"Be I? Not much! Why, I've known Korgan Murch fer months."

"You've known who?"

"Korgan Murch. That was the name he sailed by in the Bowery. He did jobs fer a saloon—not such jobs as mine here, but them that paid well. Yer see, he got strangers inter some o' them tough places, an' the feller who got out again with a full pocketbook an' whole skin might well give hisself the glad hand."

"He was in with a knock-out gang, was he?"

"It amounted ter jest about that. He decoyed them in, an' the gang did the rest. Boss, I sling beer here, but nobody can say this ain't a law-abidin' place. I wasn't never inter such biz as Korgan Murch did. He was a tough one, if he did have a glib tongue—it was that same glib tongue an' smooth way that made him fit fer his callin'. He could lure men in easy with his nice speeches."

"Did you have personal acquaintance with him?"

"No."

"Is it not possible you are in error?"

"No, sir."

"Will you swear it was this same Korgan Murch that you later saw on the schooner 'Smiling Sally'?"

"I'll swear."

"And there he was Captain Clarendon?"

"Yes."

"Yet, only a few days before he had been around South Street saying he was looking for a chance to ship?"

"Yes."

"Are you positive it was the same man who was killed on the pier?"

"Yes."

"Why haven't you told of it before?"

"I only got onter it yesterday, an' then I was goin' to keep out of it all until I met Craps Mulligan, an' he said a friend

o' his'n was after wantin' the facts, so I ups an' told the whole biz."

Chester had the story, and it added much to his previous information. The deceit practiced upon Nathaniel Grafton was plain, and he could not doubt that Levi Overbridge was at the bottom of it all. If Korgan Murch had been a decoy for sharpers of the class he had consorted with, he never would have had the knowledge, inclination or skill to put himself up as candidate for the real Oswald Clarendon's position.

A better informed man and a shrewder head had engineered the plot.

Lawyer Levi's hand showed through it all.

"I think," mused the detective, "that if there was no more to think of than the case of the false claimant I could burst the bubble in short order, but the coming of the gypsies adds force to it all. They must be disposed of, too, before Grafton will be free, and I dare not bring publicity until I can swamp them in the same sea that carries the so-called Clarendon under."

While the detective stood meditating on what he had heard, there was a call for Mr. Snip Connors to attend to his duties, and he hastened off. Craps Mulligan looked inquiringly at Chester.

"Have we spun the thread?" asked the latter.

"I reckon so, boss."

"Then we may as well go. We can only rest on our oars, but that does not mean to do nothing. Keep your eyes open, Craps, and if you get anything more I will pay you well to pass it along to me."

"I give ye the glad hand on that, fer I never lose the chance ter chase a dollar when it rattles."

They passed out of the saloon. Craps had taken quite a liking to his employer, and he was so reluctant to leave him now that he instinctively paused.

"Say," he remarked, after a deep effort to find ideas, "I reckon I know jest about where Barney Lyons kin be found. Wouldn't you like ter run around an' see what he's doin' of?"

Before Chester could answer, a boy appeared close to them, coming from the depths of the alley that extended along one side of the saloon. This youthful citizen seemed to be considerably excited over something, and his explanation was all ready.

"Say," he panted, "can't you's fellers give me a lift? Me little sister has fell an' broke her ankle, an' I want ter carry her out o' here so I kin call fer help."

"What's dat?" replied Craps.

"Me sister has fell an'—"

"I heard dat. Who is she? How'd it happen? Where is she?"

"Me name is Pat Martin, an' her's is Moll. Me an' her was climbin' up de wall when a piece of it give way—it's powerful rotten, ye see. She's in that alley, where she fell. All I want is fer you ter help carry her out ter the street."

One thumb of the boy pointed backward. They saw an alley, narrow, dark, dirty and forbidding. Nothing more could be seen.

"Lead the way to her," directed Joseph.

The boy started and they fell in behind him. The detective was speedy enough, but Craps Mulligan lagged.

"Say, boss," he whispered, "that's a dead hard place."

"It looks it. Be ready for trouble. Watch well. I scent a trap!"

CHAPTER XXII.

WOULD-BE SLAYERS.

It was simply the caution born of experience and knowledge of the vicinity that led Chester and Craps to doubt the messenger. The boy appeared to be a typical product of the region, no better and no worse than his kind in general; but they did not care to set him down as one of the hearts of oak common to South Street until he had proved his good faith.

The two men trod side by side. It was not Chester's way to be backward, and as

for Craps Mulligan, he allowed no man to lead him when danger, known or suspected, was to be met.

Craps stumbled over a stone and then muttered:

"Darker than the wish-bone in me neck!"

"Are you armed?" asked Joseph.

"Begar! I've got me fists with me—yes, I'm armed."

"Don't let anybody get the first blow."

"Sure, Mike! That kid's sister don't larrup me while I set singin' litties ter the moon."

The detective stopped short. The alley widened and the guide had become invisible.

"Boy, where are you?" Joseph inquired.

"Jest a step this way—here I be. Here's me sister, too."

There was a moan, as if somebody was in distress, and it sounded so much like that of a child that the detective was thrown off his guard a little. He pressed forward, seeking to penetrate the blackness of the alley with his gaze.

"Look out!"

Suddenly the cry came from Craps, and he made a leap which took him closer to Chester. The latter saw his ally had turned about and was facing the street, and a movement there told a good deal more. It flashed upon Joseph that enemies had closed in upon them, and were to make the attack by the rear.

"It's a fight!" added Craps, quickly. "See ter your life!"

The South Street man was using his eyes as best he could, and, though that did not mean much in the utter darkness, he saw fit to send out his clenched fist. It took somebody full in the face and bowled him over skillfully.

At the same time the detective saw men on the other side, and as he realized that they were surrounded, he rose to the occasion. He had advised Craps not to let a foe get the first blow, and he now acted on his own suggestion.

Leaping forward to meet the skulkers, he struck out lustily.

Another moment and the whole party of entrappers closed in, and it was each man for himself. Joseph had barely time to direct Craps to keep as close to him as possible, and then it was all he could do to look out for himself.

For a time there was nothing but uncertainty, but the smaller party, used to affrays like this, managed to get their backs to the wall, and then they stood up lustily. Blows were given and received, but the pressure was great, and the detective never lost sight of the fact that a knife might be brought into the game by the foe.

This could not be risked, and he determined to take the important step himself. An agile movement when a gap was left open enabled him to draw his revolver.

"Keep off!" he shouted. "I will dally no longer with you. Get away or I shall shoot. My revolver is ready. Get out!"

It was a useless warning, and he waited only a moment. He pressed the trigger.

There was a flash and a report, and a lump of lead went whizzing on its way. It was only a warning, and it did no good. Angry cries arose from the previously silent foemen, and they pressed on the more resolutely.

"Let them hev' it, boss!" gasped Craps. "Ef you don't do them, they will 'o us!"

It was too sound reasoning to be disregarded, and Joseph acted accordingly. He turned the weapon full on the men who pressed him so eagerly. He pulled the trigger once more.

A wild cry followed.

"He's done fer me!" somebody exclaimed.

Bang, bang!

Twice more the detective pressed the trigger, and the flash that came last showed an encouraging state of affairs. The gang were all in retreat. Down the interior of the alley they went like a flock of sheep, each trying to be the leader.

"Begar! we've done them!" cried Craps.

It was not yet enough for the detective, and he sprang forward to have something to show for the fight. Once he stumbled and nearly fell, but he persevered and finally ran fully into another person. He closed his hands and had a prisoner.

There was a stout resistance, but the captor was equal to the occasion, and he held fast.

"Where've you gone?" came in Craps Mulligan's voice.

"I am here."

"Hurted?"

"Not a bit. And you?"

"Sound as a trade dollar."

"The brush seems to be over, and all of the men gone but one. I have made a slight seizure. Wait! I want to see this fellow by good light. I will haul him out of the alley to the street."

Certain things gave Chester a strong suspicion, and, when he had carried out his purpose and brought the captive into the desired light, he found the theory confirmed. His prisoner was no other than the boy who had lured them into the trap. Joseph gave him a severe shaking.

"Craps," he then directed, "take your knife and run it through his ears. We will cut them off right now."

The pluck of the boy had been on the wane, and it all vanished at this thrust. He broke into sobs, protestations and pleas for mercy.

The Secret Service Expert was not inclined to waste much time, and he glared fiercely upon the culprit.

"Why should I spare you? Did you spare us?"

"Outch! Oh! I'm sorry I did it. Don't kill me—d—o—on't!" besought the boy, in a panic.

"I shall have to, unless you can put me onto the track of your confederates. It is tell on them or take the medicine yourself."

"I'll tell everything I know."

"Now you are beginning to talk real South Street English. Make your tongue move lively. Out with your story!"

"They—they—they jest hired me to do it," blubbered the boy. "They wanted me ter lure ye inter the alley, an' they said they would give me a dollar for doin' it, so I did it."

"Reckless youth! And who were they?"

"Barney Lyons an' Dan Flint."

"Oho! So that is the gang I am up against."

"They're dead anxious ter do ye, boss," added Craps. "So it seems Dan wasn't drowned when he tumbled off'n the pier that night. He is still in the swim, an' ready ter do Barney's dirty work."

The boy was questioned further, but he had told his story. The rest was only in the way of details. It was important, however, for it showed that Barney was eager to keep up his crusade against the detective. Failure had not driven him off, and Joseph Chester would be anything but a safe man while the rough was at liberty.

"Craps," pursued the detective, after a pause, "go into the saloon and get a lantern. I want to see what we have done, if anything. I fired directly at them, and there was a cry that I had 'done' for somebody. Let us see what it meant, if we can."

Craps hastened in, and the lantern was soon at hand. No policeman had appeared on the scene, and, if the revolver shots had been heard by outsiders, they did not take the trouble to ascertain what the shooting meant. Those most interested had it all to themselves.

Chester took the lantern and started, while Craps held to the boy and came after.

"Look sharp, boss," the assistant cautioned. "They may be hidin' fer ye in the bullrushes."

Joseph had all this in mind, but he did not let it interfere with his advance. He pressed on briskly, and found that he took no chances in doing so. The late assailants had escaped by another way, and the alley was deserted. The detective held

the lantern close to the ground and passed slowly along, and Craps took the hint.

"Hi, boss!" he suddenly cried, using his own eyes, "here is de sign. You peppered him!"

"What is it?"

"It's wet, an' it's red. You kin do yer own guessin'."

"He was hit, as his outcry indicated. It seems he had life enough to get off, however. Ah, here's something more."

"A pocketknife and some papers."

"They are in a pile, as if they fell from somebody's pocket. Let us see what they are."

There were half a dozen of the papers, and most of them were of the most trivial nature imaginable. They held attention only momentarily. One was of different meaning though.

It was a single sheet of paper with an address and a name in one corner, and the name was that of Levi Overbridge. Below the name was written a few lines, and Chester looked satisfied.

"Pay Flint twenty dollars," he read, silently. "The lawyer has put evidence in my hands now, and I will use it. I am tired of having him set his thugs on me. I will clip Levi's wings before another night."

CHAPTER XXIII.

SOMEBODY IS MISSING.

The following morning the Secret Service Expert rose and had breakfast. While he ate he meditated on the sins of Lawyer Levi Overbridge. He was still determined to check Levi in his attacks, and to that end he was going to make a visit to him at once with a well-defined plan in mind.

He was still thinking of it when a messenger boy put in an appearance. He had a letter in his hand, and this was delivered to Chester. Its contents gave new and important food for thought. The writing, that of a lady, was hurried and irregular, and something of the mood of the writer was to be gleaned from the words that had been penned.

"Come here at once. Nathaniel Grafton is mysteriously missing. We need your help, and need it without delay. Don't fail me."

"MARY HART."

The detective arose with some excitement.

"Missing!" he exclaimed. "What in the world does this mean? He is mysteriously missing? How is that? How can he have gone— But the way to solve that question is to go where I can inquire. Missing! Jupiter! What does this mean?"

He had made a dive for his hat while speaking, and was already hurrying out of the room. He was puzzled and greatly disturbed, but he did not long intend to remain in doubt.

Straight to the Grafton house he went.

When he rang the bell it was Mrs. Hart herself who opened the door. He was at once impressed with the fact that events had made an impression on the strong face of the housekeeper. She looked worried and nervous, for once.

"Come in!" she spoke, quickly. "I want to see you in the parlor."

Chester nodded and obeyed without a word. He began to feel the tension of the situation himself. When the threshold had been passed Mrs. Hart closed the door abruptly. She and Joseph stood within a few feet of each other, neither thinking of the chairs close at hand.

"Mr. Grafton is gone!" exclaimed the housekeeper.

"Explain!"

"I wish I could. I can only say that he has disappeared, suddenly, wholly, mysteriously."

"When did it happen?"

"Some time last night."

"What more can you tell?"

"Nothing. He retired as usual, and this morning he was gone. I might talk a whole day and tell you no more than that. It is all we know—Maggie Roach and I."

"Has he been abducted?"

"Surely. He would go in no other manner."

"How about your gypsies?"

"They did not do it."

"How do you know?"

"I made sure of the Lee family last night. I was afraid of them and fearful that they might do damage. So I planned to prevent it. As there was a spare room on their floor I went up there to sleep myself, and I adopted a scheme to avoid the necessity of keeping awake all the time. I twisted a linen thread into a rope of sufficient strength for my purpose, and yet small enough to be invisible to the casual observer. This I stretched across the stairway at the top, fastening one end there securely, and the opposite end I carried into my own room and there attached it to a bell. Thus, if anybody had tried to go down the stairs in the night he would have run against the thread, and the collision would have rung the bell violently and awakened me."

"Not bad by any means. From the fact that it did not ring you infer that the gypsies remained in their rooms."

"They certainly did not go down the stairs."

"In other words, they were not on Nathaniel Grafton's floor at all?"

"Exactly."

"Then you think it was somebody else who spirited him away?"

"It surely was."

"I am not yet sure that I share your confidence fully, for I give them credit for much cunning, and they may have beaten your device."

"They could not have seen the thread, especially in the dark."

"May they not have watched you prepare it?"

"Decidedly not. I took care of that."

"If we omit the gypsies, what have you to say about Captain Clarendon?"

"He is the only one left to suspect. I have tried to think well of him, and he has seemed to deserve it in a measure. His manner, at times, has been frank and manly. Still, he may have played a part. I will not be deceived into marking him down as what he has seemed—who could have done this but him?"

The detective shifted his gaze and looked thoughtfully at the wall for several seconds. Mrs. Hart waited eagerly to hear his decision, but when he aroused he gave her no satisfaction.

"Show me Mr. Grafton's room, please," he directed.

They went up together and were soon in that apartment. Chester looked around in curiosity. Mrs. Hart had carefully refrained from touching anything, and the place was just as she had found it in the morning. The bed had been occupied, and the covers were thrown back at one side, just as if a sleeper had quitted it in regular order. The furniture was in place systematically, and a casual survey revealed nothing out of the ordinary run.

"There is no sign of a struggle," the detective remarked.

"Mr. Grafton had not the physical strength to struggle against any muscular person."

"True."

"All is exactly as if the common course of matters had been preserved, you will see. It puzzles me."

"The abductors could easily have restored any possible disorder, and as easily have wiped out all signs of a struggle."

"Yes."

"I do not see Mr. Grafton's wearing apparel."

"It is gone. His clothes that he commonly wears are missing, but there is one thing about them that shows the haste in which the abductors worked. They took his house-coat, which, of course, is not fit for the street, and left all of his street coats. I looked to that in particular."

"Further signs of haste. Have you looked carefully about the room for minor signs that may indicate something?"

"Yes, but I want you to do the same."

Chester carried out the idea. He searched the bed, the floor, the closet and all corner and crevices. Often persons engaged in unlawful work would accidentally leave tell-tale clues behind them.

and it was for such evidence that he sought. He found absolutely nothing, and he finally rested from his labors.

"The abduction was skillfully planned and executed," he admitted.

"What do you make of it?"

"I can make nothing of what is to be seen here, for no clew remains. It is all a case of inference thus far."

"What does inference say to you?"

"I can tell better when I have gone further," evasively returned the Secret Service Expert. "Do the other inmates of the house know of the disappearance?"

"Yes."

"How did they take the news?"

"The gypsies were phlegmatic and sullen. They gave no light to their thoughts by word, but I believed they expressed suspicion in their gaze. If they are innocent they doubt me and my story."

"And your other lambs?"

"Captain Clarendon was excited, nervous and vehement. He seemed much wrought up, and he was quick to suggest a theory. It was that Mr. Grafton, worried beyond endurance by the raids on his peace of mind, had wandered off alone, and, to use his own expressions, 'some accident might befall him.' Consequently Captain Clarendon has gone to search in the streets for the missing man. Isn't that kind of the dutiful heir?"

There was a sneer in Mrs. Hart's voice, and her unbelief was plain, but Chester remained as phlegmatic as ever.

"How long has he been gone?"

"Just about two hours. He went as soon as he learned that Mr. Grafton was missing. Yes, and he took that simple-wit of his, Ai Skinner, with him. More, they remain missing. What if they do not return at all?"

"I think I follow you; but if they run away, how are they to get any money from Grafton's possessions?"

"Maybe they have given that up, and are just seeking to protect themselves."

"They will return," calmly decided Joseph. "If they had planned to run away they would not have tarried to abduct Nathaniel Grafton."

"There is logic in that, but you can't convince me that our sea captain is guiltless of the abduction—"

"I have not tried to do so—"

"For he slept in the next room to Mr. Grafton, and must have heard the struggle last night. It could not have remained unheard by him—"

"Wait a bit! Somebody is coming, Mrs. Hart."

Joseph had heard very audible footsteps. Now they waited but a moment when the door opened. Captain Clarendon walked in promptly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE IMPOSTOR UNDER FIRE.

A slight start on the part of the newcomer when he noticed the detective seemed to indicate that he had not expected the meeting, but he did not take the time necessary to greet Chester then. Instead, he quickly shifted his gaze to Mrs. Hart, and spoke with an appearance of solicitude.

"Is there anything new?"

"Not here," the housekeeper replied.

"I have found no trace of Mr. Grafton. I have inquired all along the block, and of everybody near who was likely to be astir then. Of course I have seen the man who was the police patrolman on this block during the night. Nobody saw Mr. Grafton."

"Maybe he has been swallowed up by an earthquake," suggested the housekeeper, with a touch of sarcasm.

"It does look like it. Chester, what do you make of this affair?"

As he added the last words Thomas Fogg turned to the detective, and his manner was eager and quick.

"I have but lately arrived," placidly responded Joseph, "and can, as yet, hazard no definite opinion. What do you think of it?"

"Simply that he has wandered off of his own accord, possessed with a strong but illogical wish to get out of the reach

of Gideon Lee and his gypsy companions."

"Then you do not apprehend foul play?"

"My theory is only theory, but I give it for what it may be worth."

"Your room was next to Mr. Grafton's. Did you hear nothing?"

"Not a sound."

"Should you have heard a struggle, if one had occurred there?"

"I believe I should."

"It does seem that you would."

"Such is my opinion."

Thomas stood erect and looked the detective calmly in the face. Chester had to confess, mentally, that it was the way of an innocent man, but he knew there were good actors in the world. Captain Clarendon might be one of them.

"Do you feel no suspicion of the gypsies?" continued Chester.

"After what has happened I can but believe them capable of anything, but in this case I exonerate them. How they could get Mr. Grafton out of the room unheard by me I don't see. I do not believe they are guilty of his disappearance."

"Your man, Ai Skinner, has also been occupying your room of late, has he not?"

"Yes; to be near in case we were required to give aid to Mr. Grafton, you know."

"I would like to see Ai."

Thomas suddenly looked worried.

"Ai can tell nothing. He has assured me he heard nothing."

"Yet I wish to question him. I may bring out some points not thought of by you—"

"He says he was not once awake during the night," nervously exclaimed the impostor.

"Recollection is often quickened by questioning. Mrs. Hart, will you go and bring Ai Skinner here? I want Captain Clarendon's aid in the meanwhile, so I will ask you to go."

"I can do it," exclaimed Thomas, with some haste. "It will take but a moment."

He started, but Mrs. Hart, believing that she understood Joseph in part, calmly pushed in ahead of him.

"Don't trouble yourself, captain. I shall be glad to help."

"And I need you here, captain," added the detective, placidly.

The impostor gave it up. He still looked worried, but he could not dwell on the point without arousing suspicion. Mrs. Hart bustled down the stairs, while the detective made a show of wanting to call Thomas's attention to certain things in the room, the only naturally disordered bed and the general air of peace everywhere seen.

Thus Thomas was kept busy until the housekeeper arrived with Ai in tow. The ex-circus performer was in his best spirits and unsuspecting of danger, and he tripped into the room buoyantly.

"Dear me," he exclaimed, "isn't it funny where the old gentleman has gone? Now, if he were a boy, we should naturally infer he had cut and run to join the circus—I did that when I was a bounding youth, and Mr. Grafton is a good deal like I was when I was a boy—I mean if he was a boy he would be a good deal like what I was, and so his absence would be explained, if he were a boy. But he isn't, so—"

Ai stopped short, meditated, and then laughed and added:

"So he isn't."

"Get your cracked brain into order!" sharply requested Thomas, scowling upon his alleged valet. "Mr. Chester wishes to question you, so see that you confine yourself to business, and avoid all minor things unless they are mentioned by him."

"Allow me," quietly suggested the detective. "Mr. Skinner, did you hear the fight in this room last night?"

"Everything of it!" declared Ai, with his sunniest smile. "The struggle, the flashing of the revolvers, and the looks of the desperate contestants, the lurid glare of their eyes—I heard all of this."

Thomas had once started to interrupt,

but he changed his mind and allowed Ai to have his say.

"What did you see?" continued the special.

"Their quick, panting breath, the grating of their teeth, and the dull thud of their blows."

Chester walked over to the blandly-smiling speaker and touched him on the shoulder sharply.

"Enough of your nonsense. Did you hear, or see, anything during the night?"

"Not a thing, nor Tommy Fogg didn't, neither. Did you, Tommy?"

Thomas glared at his friend as if he longed to annihilate him then and there. Ai's wayward tongue was always getting them into trouble, and he almost wished it was cut out.

"You knave!" he cried, "will you ever remember that common-sense is needed in life? I have a good mind to flog you. Ever since your sunstroke on the coast of South America you have been unfitted for your station, and weak of mind. Let this nonsense stop, or I will have you kicked out of the house!"

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" reproachfully exclaimed Ai.

"Why do you call your master Tommy Fogg, when his name is Captain Clarendon?" inquired Mrs. Hart.

"Eh?" cried Ai, with a start. "Oh! I didn't call him Tommy Fogg, ma'am. Indeed, I didn't. Tommy was killed by an earthquake in the wilds of Labrador, and I perished with him. That is, Captain Clarendon was killed somewhere, and I perished—oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, where did we die?"

The luckless "servant" started toward Thomas and held out his hand beseechingly, but, though the impostor had been thrown into a fever by his ally's stupidity, Chester surprised all parties by ignoring the bad break. He looked at Thomas with a face that told nothing in the way of suspicion.

"I think, if this is all we can develop, that we shall have to let you answer for Ai Skinner. Possibly he answers you more to the point, and you have already explored the mine of profound intellect and extracted all the gold."

"I have questioned him fully," hurriedly agreed the impostor. "He assures me he heard nothing. Now, go—go, you blockhead, and don't let us see any more of you."

Thomas seized his "valet" and hustled him out into the hall. From that point a plaintive murmur floated back: "Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" and then Fogg re-closed the door.

"The fellow is really little less than an idiot, but he saved my life once, and I have to keep him out of gratitude. Pray do not mind his want of respect and so forth."

Thomas looked as hot and uncomfortable as a day laborer, but, though Mrs. Hart looked volumes and seemed to think the time had come to unmask a suspected cheat, the detective again ignored all of these peculiar things.

"We are, then," he quietly observed, "without any clew to the mystery of Mr. Grafton's disappearance."

"I can only repeat my belief that he has been harassed into leaving the house," returned Thomas. "Those gypsies were making life intolerable for him, and you well know he was not in condition to meet such oppression as a stronger-minded man would. It is my theory that he has run away. Now, Mr. Chester, I do not want to influence you, and I hope you will use your own judgment; I only mention this because, in any case, it can do no harm to consider the possibility."

"Certainly not."

"More, I want to consult with Mrs. Hart as to the advisability of offering a reward for the finding of Mr. Grafton."

The housekeeper grew alert, and her eyes glittered.

"Do you think that is the only way to find him?" she demanded, meaningly.

"I mention it only because an ordinary officer is stirred to extra efforts by such an offer."

"We can consider it later on," answered the detective. "Just now our proper course seems to be to—"

He was interrupted. The door opened and Gormora Lee entered without ceremony. Then she stopped, but there were signs of something out of the ordinary course of events. Her barbarian eyes were winking strangely, and she appeared to be excited. Something was coming.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GYPSY'S ACCUSATION.

Gormora stretched out one arm in an impressive gesture.

"What have you done with Nathaniel Grafton?" she demanded.

The question was asked of Mrs. Hart, whom she seemed to regard as the chief of all there, but Joseph Chester took it upon himself to make reply.

"Just what we want to know," he returned, quickly. "Where is he?"

"Why do you ask me?" retorted the gypsy.

"Because you have spirited him away."

"It is false!" she cried, with suppressed vehemence.

"Then where is he?"

"Ask those who have hid him. They can find what they have put away. Ay, and they shall find him!"

With this angry addition she stalked close to Mrs. Hart and sharply exclaimed:

"I will not endure this!"

"Endure what?"

"You think to cheat me of my rights by hiding Grafton, but it will not work. He is mine, and I will have him. The wandering people never strike in vain, and in this matter they are determined. Zarah is the child of Grafton, and she shall inherit his wealth. Do you believe we can be beaten off just because he is hidden by you?"

"Woman," again broke in the detective, "you cannot avert notice from yourself thus. What have you done with Grafton?"

"Dog of an American!" was the swift retort, "I know not where he is. Would the wandering people destroy all their chances by stealing away the man who must make their case for them? No, no! You may be sincere—if you are, know that the gypsies are innocent, and look for the stealers among those whose interests could be served by his disappearance. Ask yonder woman!"

It was to Mrs. Hart she pointed, but the housekeeper only looked at Chester. She was still of the opinion that the Lees had not stolen Nathaniel, and she did not care to press this new warfare. Whatever the detective really thought, he made a mild reply.

"We all need to unite in this. Whatever is the real explanation, Mrs. Hart has not taken Grafton away—"

"She lies if she says it!" cried the gypsy.

"Be calm!"

"Calm! And with blood on the floor?"

"I see no blood."

"There is blood here—blood, blood, blood!" exclaimed the gypsy, wildly. "It stains everything; it is over all things. Think you the wandering woman cannot see it? Has she not the gift of second sight? Ay, and even my nostrils tell the tale. The odor rises to heaven and cries aloud for the righting of a wrong. Ha! Is not the shadow of murder over this house?"

She beat her breast frantically, and her manner was so violent and unnatural that Thomas Fogg fell back a little. He thought just then that she was crazy, but Joseph made no such error. Sanity was in her eyes and face, and if her way was exaggerated, was she not of people of marked manners?

Something further about her conduct impressed the detective. He looked at her keenly and analytically, and asked in reply:

"Where do you see the shadow of murder?"

"Everywhere!"

"Not very definite. And where the blood?"

"Here! There! Everywhere!"

Again she was indirect, but she looked at the floor and waved her arms in a circle as she did so.

"I will thank you to show me some of it."

"You doubt me. I will show you!"

Quickly Gormora dropped on her knees. She bent her ragged head and her eyes studied the carpet at one point just in front of her. Chester and Mrs. Hart exchanged glances, and there was uncertainty in the expression of each. How much of this was empty show; how much was done with practical meaning?

Suddenly the gypsy straightened up again.

"Look!" she uttered.

One of her bony fingers indicated a point of the floor in front of her, and a peculiar feeling came over Joseph Chester. In spite of himself, she had impressed him. He moved forward.

"Blood!" muttered Gormora, deeply.

There was a stain on the carpet. He saw it there, and it appeared fresh, but he was not so ready to accept it as what she claimed. Blood it might be, so far as anything showed to the contrary, however. He mentally admitted that.

"Your eyes must be sharp to have seen this," he remarked.

"I saw it with the eyes of second sight."

"A remarkable gift to have."

"The Maker of Man knows to whom to give it. To one he gives money, and that one is the American. To another he gives knowledge of things done and things to come, and that is the gypsy. Which is the greater gift? One is of the earth; the other reaches to the world of which no American shall know until he loses his money and his life."

Gormora arose. She was now calm; she had had her say, and it appeared her, it seemed. She folded her arms and stood as erect as if she had been forty years younger.

"What do you make of this stain?" pursued Chester.

"Did Nathaniel Grafton die here?" was the swift response.

"Is it your belief that he did die?" the detective asked, in reply.

"I know not. I do not claim to know all things; I want not to know them. Have you searched this room? Have you found all there is here? My gypsy blood tells me there is something to follow. Seek! Else ye find not."

Chester's gaze wandered about the room. He was serious and thoughtful, and his tone was absent as he murmured:

"We have looked to all visible things. Can it be there are—"

He went closer to the wall. He rapped upon it, here and there, evidently noting the sound that echoed after. He brought forth only the clear result that told of a solid wall.

"Of course," he added, presently, looking at Mrs. Hart, "you would know if there was any secret receptacle in the walls or floor. Do you know of such a place?"

"Impossible!" she replied. "This house is not a den of marvels and architectural devices. It was not built in that age of time."

Joseph did not heed the reply, but continued to sound the walls. He made a circuit of the room without discovering any spot that gave forth a sound to indicate a hollow space beyond. His sudden idea had brought nothing, and he stopped near the watching trio.

"We may as well abandon this vain attempt," he remarked.

"But the blood on the floor?" demanded Gormora, stoutly.

"Who knows that it is blood?"

"My gypsy wit tells me so."

"What more?"

"Nothing."

"Then I have no faith in your alleged gift. A power of second-sight that goes just far enough to suggest a tragedy, and then stops short, is not of much use. We may as well drop it."

Mrs. Hart suddenly aroused. She had been waiting for the end of the interview.

It had come, and her instinct as housekeeper renewed itself.

"I will put this room in order," she exclaimed. "It looks dreadful, and it must be ready if Mr. Grafton comes back."

She bustled toward a group of chairs, the situation of which offended her eye, and Thomas Fogg, partially in her way, stepped aside to give her ample room. He had been leaning on the back of a chair, and, as he sought to move, something caught and held his coat momentarily. The garment was forced into an unnatural position, the lower end drawing up as pressure was brought to bear upon it, and the effect became that of inversion. Then something singular happened.

Nobody had given more than passing attention to this every-day event, but their eyes were on the man whose coat was thus spread-eagled, and they saw something fall from his pocket to the floor. A dull sound followed, and then four pairs of eyes were fixed on a common center.

A knife was sticking in the carpeted floor, the point buried and the handle erect.

Silence, long and deep ensued. A knife had fallen from Thomas Fogg's pocket, and it appeared at a very striking moment. It suggested much, and what would have been of only passing interest at another time was colored by the mysterious absence of Nathaniel Grafton.

The impostor looked with interest fully equal to that of any of his companions, and then a flush suddenly appeared in his cheeks. He stooped and picked up the weapon, trying to seem at ease.

"I thought I had lost it," he muttered, uneasily.

Gormora aroused with abrupt vehemence:

"Look!" she cried. "Look to the man who carries that thing even here? Why does he carry it? What has that knife done?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Thomas, irritably.

"That is the same knife you have had all along, isn't it, Captain Clarendon?" inquired the detective.

"Yes, but I thought I had lost it."

"Lost it? How is that?"

"It has been missing."

"Feeble device!" cried Gormora, loudly. "Look to that knife!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE STAIN ON THE BLADE.

Thomas Fogg, now excited and disturbed, turned angrily upon old Gormora.

"I will thank you to mind your own business!" he hotly exclaimed. "It is nothing to you! Keep your tongue to yourself, or it will be the worse for you!"

"Ha!" cried the gypsy; "the gallant heir fears an investigation. Good! That speaks for itself. He and yonder woman—Hart, she calls herself—have murdered Nathaniel Grafton!"

"An infamous falsehood!" shouted Thomas.

"Why the knife then? Why was it in your pocket?"

"I did not know it was there. I missed it last night when I retired. I could find it nowhere, and am certain it was not in my room; I had not seen it until it dropped from my pocket, just now. How it got into the pocket I know not."

"Maybe you are willing to have us examine the knife closely?"

"You cannot touch it, gypsy hag. Others may, if they wish. The knife must have been stolen from me last night, and as the thief has had a chance to tamper with it all he wished, I disclaim all knowledge of its condition."

With this he handed the weapon to Chester.

"Look at it," he added, curtly.

The Expert obeyed. He easily recognized the knife as that which he had before seen in Thomas's possession, and which he claimed to have obtained in the West Indies.

Taking the weapon to the window, where the light was strong, Chester looked intently at it for a few moments, and then turned about.

"There is fresh blood on this blade!" he announced.

"Blood!" gasped Thomas Fogg.

"Ha!" cried Gormora, "did I not tell you so? Where is Nathaniel Grafton?"

At the first word Mrs. Hart sprang forward and snatched the knife away and looked for herself. Evidently she was speedily satisfied.

"The damning proof is here!" she exclaimed. "The red brand is easily seen! Grafton is gone, and Captain Clarendon's knife is blood-stained. It tells the whole story!"

Thomas Fogg, now very pale, seemed on the point of collapse. His frame and face alike quivered.

"Just Heaven! do you think I would injure the feeble old man who has so much to bear? I swear to you that I am innocent! Chester, speak out! You are experienced, wise, just. Speak for me! Do not let this solitary thing brand me. Speak!" and the impostor held out his hands beseechingly.

"Be at peace!" answered Chester. "A fragment is not the whole. When we know that violence has been done to Mr. Grafton; when we know that this knife did the violent deed, then we can say something more definite. Captain, can you prove that you lost this knife?"

"Ai Skinner can do that. I missed it when we retired and hunted for it in vain. Ai can tell you that."

"A fine witness!" sneered Gormora. "A murderous master and a fool of a man. Fine combination!"

The special turned upon her with swift decision.

"Speak for yourself!" he ordered incisively. "Nobody suggested a tragedy until you had your say. How did you know of the blood-spot on the floor?—if that is what it is. You stood near Captain Clarendon. Are you sure you did not slip the knife into his pocket?"

"That's it!" exclaimed Thomas, his pale face brightening up with hope. "She was near me—so near that she touched me as we stood there. Answer, woman! Did you or did you not slip the knife into my pocket?"

The charge changed Gormora's manner wholly, and a sneering smile stole over her bronzed face.

"A far-fetched pretense!" she muttered, disdainfully. "I will not take the trouble to deny it. You all know it is absurd!" and Gormora folded her arms in a defiant manner.

"All here must clear themselves or be open to suspicion. Where were you last night?" demanded the detective.

"That is my business."

Chester scanned her for a moment, and then said with coolness equal to her own:

"Have it as you will. My experience is that innocent persons defend themselves under accusation. If you decline we are at liberty to form our own opinions. Captain Clarendon, I wish to consult with you in your room, if you please. This room must be closed at once and locked. Mrs. Hart, you can keep the key."

Gormora turned and walked composedly away. Mrs. Hart took the key, and everybody moved out to the hall, Joseph leading the way to the impostor's room.

Thomas looked worried by the prospect of another ordeal, but tried to make the best of it, and set a chair for his guest.

"Never mind," remarked Chester. "Have you seen your lawyer yet?"

"My lawyer?" repeated Thomas.

"Perhaps I should say the family lawyer—I refer to Mr. Levi Overbridge."

"I have not seen him. Naturally, I thought of him when I learned that Mr. Grafton was missing, for Overbridge has been the family lawyer for many years. I went to his house, but he was not in."

"In such a crisis he is needed. We will send for Overbridge."

"I will go," eagerly cried the impostor.

"Do not put yourself to the trouble," quietly requested Joseph. "A messenger boy will do just as well, and you and I have no time to do useless errands. We want Overbridge here. We will send for him."

CHAPTER XXVII.

LEVI IS CALLED IN.

The other heard this decision with uneasiness. He had spoken truly when he mentioned his visit to the old lawyer's house. He had wished to see Levi, and tell him of the disappearance, for he felt the need of his advice. Now, he wanted to tell the lawyer himself what was to be said, but Chester's quiet determination had cut off the chance.

"Where is your man Skinner?" the detective demanded.

"I don't know."

Thomas looked around the room. On the bed lay a "sweater" which Ai used in his bicycle-riding, but the valet was not visible. Thomas suspected that he had run away in a panic.

"I will go to the office myself," added the detective. "It will require but a few moments."

There was no objection, and Thomas saw him go with a sense of temporary relief, but a sound at one side drew his attention. Then he looked and saw Ai Skinner's head protruding from under the old-fashioned bed. Ai was looking all around anxiously.

"Is he gone?" he whispered.

"What are you doing there?" sharply demanded Thomas. "Come out immediately."

"I don't dare to. I'm going to stay right here, Tommy."

"You idiot! Come out!" and Thomas, seizing the man, forcibly drew him forth.

"What would Chester have thought had he seen you hiding under the bed?" sharply added the speaker.

"I only know what I thought," plaintively explained Ai. "Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, we shall be arrested and sent to the gibbet. The gallows—"

"Silence, you fool! We are in desperate straits. Our lives are in peril. We shall be questioned further, but we must be wise and cunning. Now listen!" cried Thomas, shaking Ai violently. "You never were cut out for prudence or cunning, but can't you summon a little common-sense? When they talk to you don't be a fool, and don't you dare to call me Tommy Fogg again."

"Not once, captain. I'll not forget!"

"Well, now, get out of this room before Chester comes back. Keep away from him. Do you hear?" and Thomas immediately proceeded to eject his valet.

"That stupid will get us both into trouble," he murmured as he closed the door, "but I am not sure it will make much difference. I fear this man Chester, and his eyes worry me. From the first he has looked at me in a peculiar way, and I almost believe he has understood the deceit fully from the start. There is something in his manner that I can't fathom—it's just as if he sees straight through me. It is as if he has seen fit to give me rope and wait until he is ready to spring his trap. Cool devil! how he chills me!"

Nervously Thomas paced the room until Chester returned. Then they talked again of Grafton's disappearance, and sooner than they expected Overbridge put in an appearance. The note summoning him had been written in the name of Captain Clarendon, and he was wholly unprepared to see the detective.

For a moment his eyes quivered, but he quickly had control of himself.

"Mr. Overbridge," promptly began Joseph, "have you seen Grafton recently?"

"Not for two days, sir. I trust he is not ill."

"He is missing."

"Missing, sir, missing?" echoed Overbridge, looking bewildered.

"He was not to be found here this morning, and we do not know where he is."

"This is amazing. Where can he have gone? How has he gone?"

"Just what we wish you to tell us, Mr. Overbridge."

"I wish I could, but this dumfounds me. If he really is gone, it is my opinion the Lees are at the bottom of it all!" Levi asserted.

"But Mrs. Hart declares they were not

below their own floor in the house last night.

"Captain Clarendon believes that Grafton wandered off when worrying over the troubles he had to endure."

"Only a theory of mine," hurriedly explained Thomas.

"It may be right," admitted the lawyer, "but I doubt those gypsies. They are thoroughly evil."

"You have no faith in their claims?"

"Faith? Bah! They are the vilest impostors. We must act! As the attorney of Nathaniel Grafton I shall be glad to do all I can to find the missing man."

"Of course, in his absence, Captain Clarendon must assume charge here. In case Mr. Grafton does not return at all, Clarendon will keep possession here. In fact, if Grafton is dead, the captain will inherit the estate all the quicker. Now, let me ask, Mr. Overbridge, isn't there some way of law by which Clarendon can declare himself more fully and take immediate possession of the estate?"

"I will not do that to please either of you!" exclaimed Thomas, with emphasis.

"Quite right," agreed Levi.

"But, if it will soon be his anyhow—"

"When Grafton is dead he can proceed according to law, and if I remain his lawyer I can then instruct him what to do. I decline to authorize any radical step now—it would be highly improper. Besides, there is no occasion for it. I will personally assume the expense of the search, if need be, for Grafton is my friend as well as client. Go ahead and find him, and you shall be well paid."

The detective bowed.

"Just as you say. That satisfies me."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DETECTIVE'S FACE.

The interview was not prolonged, and Overbridge, rising to depart, turned to the impostor.

"Will you walk a part of the way with me, Captain Clarendon?" he asked.

"Certainly," answered Thomas, willingly.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, as soon as it was safe to converse, out on the street. "Does it threaten ruin to us?"

"Maybe so."

"What misery we have brought upon ourselves!" groaned Thomas.

"Do you weaken?" fiercely demanded Overbridge.

"I repent of my villainy."

"Villainy?"

"I have stolen another man's rights, and I am ashamed of it. I never was cut out for a knave."

Levi fairly glared at his companion.

"Do you intend to confess?"

"No; decidedly no! I cannot, if I would. Have no fear on that head, for I shall fight it out as bravely as you. I am no coward, if I do say it. If I writhe in spirit, I shall not collapse in nerve. Be easy on that. But, Overbridge, what is the meaning of Grafton's disappearance?"

"My office is near. Wait until I get there."

Thomas relapsed into silence, and nothing more was said until they reached their destination. There Levi locked the door and turned abruptly upon the impostor.

"Don't you understand this?" he demanded. "Don't you see it all? Mrs. Hart has long been with old Nathaniel, and the way she has lorded it there must have told you that she has had tremendous power over him. In fact, I believe she expected to receive the greater part of his property. Your coming put an obstacle in her path, and the gypsies added to it. Two heirs menaced her, and Grafton was in a mental condition where he was liable to make erratic disposal of his property and cut her off."

"Has he ever made a will?"

"It used to be a diversion of mine to draw new wills for him and destroy old ones, but he has abandoned that practice for some time, as far as I am concerned," added Levi, meaningly.

"Do you think some other lawyer has drawn one for him?"

"I suspect he has—in favor of Mrs. Hart."

"Indeed?"

"That woman is as cunning as a fox. Her cunning has shown in the past; it shows now. Well, suppose she had a will in her favor and heirs grew thick. What would she do but lure Nathaniel off where he could make no more wills and destroy none?"

"I see, I see."

"Remember, she has more influence over him than anybody else. He would go willingly."

"And you think the explanation lies right there—you think she has prevailed upon him to go into hiding, and that she is now playing possum to deceive us?"

"Yes, decidedly; and further, you will note that the detective is very chummy with Mrs. Hart, and that they seem to understand each other."

"Would Chester conspire with that woman?"

The two men had been standing quietly, but Levi now seized Tommy's arm in a nervous grasp.

"Captain," he cried, "who is this Chester, anyhow, and why is he so interested in this matter? I may be all wrong; I may be nervous over this worrisome case, but he calls up memories. He looks like—I tell you his face troubles me."

"His face? Speak out, man, if there is more to threaten us," urged the impostor, "what of his face?"

"He looks like the genuine Oswald Clarendon!"

"What?"

Thomas would have fallen back but for the grasp on his arm. He and Overbridge presented a pair of pale faces to each other's gaze.

"The fate of the genuine Oswald is in doubt," continued Levi. "He was supposed by some to have been killed in a railroad accident—you have heard of that, and know my part in seeking to identify the mangled body. Maybe it was young Clarendon. I don't know. It seemed safe enough to assume that he died somehow about then. A boy of fifteen years, he ran away as many other boys have done. When a boy does that he generally comes to grief, and most of them that don't soon return are overtaken by death, by accident or sickness. We assumed that Oswald went that way."

"But Joseph Chester—"

"Has Oswald's face?"

"Levi," tremulously pursued Thomas, "do you think it is he?"

"I wish I knew!"

Overbridge fell to pacing the room with quick steps. He was deeply wrought up—yes, and frightened.

The impostor watched him aghast for several moments, and then broke the silence:

"Chester always has puzzled me; from the beginning his way had been peculiar. On the surface he was the cool, reserved, stoical detective, but there has been something in his manner—vague and undefinable, yet impressive—that I could see and feel. I always had the notion that he knew more than he told, and he not only looked at me as if he wished to read my very mind, but as if he succeeded. I have felt that he was playing with me, cat and mouse fashion, and as if he could tumble my house of straw over whenever he wished."

"Ordinarily, this would be no more than the conjuring up of fears by a guilty mind, but it may be more now," thoughtfully remarked Levi. The real Oswald had a scar on his arm, halfway from his hand to his elbow. You must see Chester's arm and learn if the scar is there. We must now ascertain for a certainty who he is!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TERRIBLE VISITOR.

There was a lull at the Grafton house—a quieting of the tumultuous elements, and nobody seemed to want to do more wrangling.

Ai Skinner had come out of the room occupied by Captain Clarendon, and with cautious steps he passed down the stairs and entered the parlor; but scarcely had

he done so when the door-bell rang. Mechanically Ai went to open it. He turned the knob and made an aperture. Then, with a gasp of terror, he fell back.

Esrad Dyer stood there, in the hall!

The Evil One was not more terrible in Ai's sight than this fierce ally of the Lees, who now was in belligerent mood, for, glaring upon Ai with true piratical intensity, he at once burst forth:

"Say, nigger! I want Gideon Lee."

"You wa—wa—want Gideon Le—le—lee?" stammered the ex-circus man. "He has gone out."

"Where is Gormora?"

"Gone with Gideon."

"I'll wait. Wait in here. Do you understand?" and seizing Ai in a violent grasp, he shoved him roughly into the parlor. This done, he dumped his victim down in a chair at one side of the old-fashioned center-table, and himself took the opposite side.

"You're the nigger here, I take it, ain't ye?" he demanded.

"A—a what?" whispered the victim.

"Nigger—slave—servant."

Ai brightened up. Brilliant thought! While he was a servant he ought to be reasonably safe and in less danger of the knife carried by Esrad.

"Yes, yes; that's it!" he agreed. "I'm the waiting man!"

"Been here long?"

"Twenty years, sir."

"Humph! Ho! Yes!" growled the gypsy. "Say, do ye know what I'm going to do?"

"No, sir."

"There's a man," the gypsy pursued, "that I am going to silence. He has done me foul wrong, and the gypsy never forgives. Now, look ye, menial, I am Esrad Dyer! I am a son of royal people, and the best blood of Spain is in my veins."

"Yes, sir, I can see it. You must like it. My blood is in my veins, and I want to keep it there."

"Away back to the days when the Moors invaded Spain goes my known ancestry. My sire of that day was a nobleman, and he fought valiantly against the invaders until all were driven from the sunny land of my people, glad to go."

"I don't wonder they were."

"But I have not the riches of my ancestors; I am a poor and wandering gypsy, yet my blood flows as warmly as theirs. Listen! A man has done me foul wrong! He, too, is a gypsy, but he has no royal blood in his veins. I shall kill him!"

"Shall I go and bring him to you? If you will excuse me a moment I will bring anybody—"

"Tarry where you are. He stole my wife! She was a Lee, and sister to Zarah, or half-sister, as Gormora says. I married her. We lived together for many months and all went well. True, we sometimes quarreled, and I struck her, but it was done for her good. Mind you, women have to be used that way. They are shallow-pated and rebellious, and it is for their true good that they be chastised now and then. I chastised her when she was rebellious—beautiful Coila!"

"Quite right," agreed Ai. "All husbands thrash their wives—mine thrashed me—I mean, I thrashed my wife—"

"Silence, fool!" commanded Esrad, menacingly.

"The time came when I parted from her, briefly, as I thought. When I returned she had eloped with Korgan Murch. Ah! I will kill him!"

"That was his name—Korgan Murch! I never set eyes on him, but I know of him. He stole my wife—she ran away with him. True, she had what some people call a conscience, and she got a divorce because I had chastised her; but I disown the divorce. Gar—r—r! I disown the law, anyhow! The gypsy is a law to himself! No divorce can excuse Korgan Murch! Coila went with him. He dies! Nigger, slave, servant, that thief—that Korgan Murch—is in this house. I am here, too!"

Esrad whipped out his knife and swung it on high.

"Murder!"

The word passed Ai's lips, but it was

only a feeble little whisper, that could not have been heard in the hall.

But the gypsy only buried the point of the knife in the mahogany table, leaving the handle sticking up.

He glared silently at Ai, his brows knit until they made a bristling bunch of hair, his eyes threatening to shoot out of their sockets. He was a terrible figure, really, and meek Ai was not to blame for his alarm.

"I want him," added Esrad, after studying his victim for a while. "I want the man who stole Coila. I want the man who abandoned her on the road and left her to die. I want Korgan Murch. Bring him to me!"

"I—I don't know him," whispered Ai.

"He is Captain Clarendon!"

"Oh, no, no; you are wrong. Tommy Fogg wouldn't do such a thing. He don't like the girls, nohow, and we can prove an alibi. He can prove one by me, and I can prove one by him. We were at sea when your divorced wife ran away—"

"We, we? Are you in it, too? Ha! then I have a debt to settle with you, too. We will settle now!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MAN WHO WANTED TO KILL HIM.

There was room for doubt if Esrad meant anything of the sort, but Ai thought he did, and another faint cry came from his lips. It had hardly been uttered when another man crossed the threshold of the room and saw the remarkable scene—Ai struggling in the grasp of the muscular gypsy, and the knife sticking in the table between them.

The ex-circus man saw the new-comer, and a new cry greeted him—this time one of joy.

"Oh, Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" he exclaimed, "you are just in time. Help! He's murdering me!"

It was Thomas, sure enough, but he did not rush to succor Ai.

He knew the gypsy, and a chill ran over him as he meditated on his probable errand there.

Esrad turned his tiger-like eyes upon the new-comer, and a gratified expression appeared on his swarthy face.

"Ha! so you've come?" he exclaimed, releasing his grip on Ai.

"Yes, I've come," was replied. "What of it?"

"You are Captain Clarendon, be ye?"

"Yes."

"Otherwise Korgan Murch?"

"I know nothing about Korgan Murch," calmly answered Thomas.

"Oh! don't ye? Come, don't think to fool me. I know you well. Yes, I know you, and I've come here to kill you."

"Come here to kill me, have you? Well, try it, and I shall pitch you out of that door and break your neck."

"You would pitch me out? Break my neck? Why, you poor fool, do ye see that?" and Esrad picked up his knife and then buried it again in the table.

"Yes. It's a penknife. Did you steal it?"

Esrad felt the contemptuous looks more than the words, and they had a strange effect on him. He grew quieter, and there was a slight grayness about his swarthy complexion that told of consuming rage. It was in a husky whisper that he next spoke.

"Do ye know who I am?" he asked.

"I don't care."

"I am Esrad Dyer, and I am here to kill. I am Coila's husband!"

"I don't know her, but she's to be pitied for having such a husband as you."

"She was a Lee—granddaughter of Gormora Lee," persisted Esrad.

"Never mind your family genealogy. I want this room now. Unless you have business I will bid you good-day. Ai, open the street door and see this man out."

Esrad balanced himself firmly on his feet.

"You order me out, do ye?" he grated, with deliberate speech. "I would like to see you force me out of your doors. Try it!"

"As far as I am concerned I would not soil my hands with such a low fellow. My

plan would be to have a servant pitch you into the gutter. See?"

"Before that is tried you and I have an account to settle," hissed Esrad. "Let us settle it this way!" and the gypsy, with lithe movements moved forward, knife up-raised.

But he suddenly recoiled, for he found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver.

"Stop! or you are a dead man!" was warned, and motioning to a chair, he ordered, "sit down!" bringing the revolver to a level, finger on trigger.

The gypsy, ruffian as he was, obeyed with alacrity, and sank into a chair. Again he was by the table, and Thomas calmly took his seat at the opposite side, the revolver held within a few inches of Esrad's nose.

"This is loaded," added the master of the situation. "If you make a hostile move I shall shoot you dead."

"You call me Korgan Murch. I am nothing of the sort. In some way you have made a mistake. You have before now said that you never saw him, and that he was a gypsy. Look at me! Do I look like a gypsy?"

"No," the avenger admitted.

"I am not. I know nothing about gypsies, or the Lee family, or your ex-wife, who ran away. I tell you I am not your man."

"But I thought—"

"In some way you have made a mistake. Look at me further. I, a gypsy? Nonsense! You know better."

Esrad rubbed his rough brow.

"I don't understand it," he muttered, replacing his ugly knife in its sheath.

"We will let this rest for now," he decided. "If you are innocent, you're safe. If I find you are Korgan Murch, you die!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THOMAS IS WORRIED.

The gypsy, arising, passed into the hall, opened the front door and disappeared, much to Tommy's relief.

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg! How could you be so brave?"

The cry rose weakly from Ai Skinner. He had been at the rear all the while, but not an actor in the drama.

Thomas replaced the revolver and laughed unmusically.

"I almost wanted him to kill me. Brave? What is life to me? I intend to fight it out with every man who wants a row with me. If anybody succeeds in killing me off, so much the better. I don't deserve to live. I am a cheat, a swindler, a knave. Better for me and all concerned if they do finish me off."

"But what would I do?" almost wailed the ex-circus man.

"Leave this den of infamy."

"But where should I go?"

"Back to the road. Back to freedom, happiness, careless vagabondage and safety from plots and deceits. We always were content when we led that life. We had no foes, and the seedy clothes that covered our backs were always a shade better than the rags of tramps. Of course that is just what we were, practically—tramps—but we were never low down. That was a happy period in our lives. Go back to it, and thank fate that you have the chance. Go back—"

"No! Do not go back!" cried the substitute heir, with a sudden change of tone and manner. "Don't do that. Seek a better life. We did no man harm then—except ourselves. Did we do good to anybody? No! Seek a better life. Cast off the demon of sloth. Work. Be a man! Assert the manhood that is planted within you, and your soul will expand with every breath you draw. Work! Wield the spade! Swing the sledge! Drive the nail! Avoid the road as you would a viper! Avoid sloth! Work! Be a man!"

Thomas Fogg drew himself up to his full height and his voice rang out with something in it that was dramatically impressive. He was deeply moved, and his face twitched with emotion. The memory of his wasted life was strong then, and it brought none of the olden pleasure. He saw himself as he had been, and the re-

turn of manhood sent his blood bounding with new force and new warmth.

Ai gazed dumfounded.

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, I can't!" he moaned.

"Can't?"

"I can't work. It would tire me all out. I should lie awake every night thinking of the work to be done on the morrow. Work! It would stiffen my muscles so I couldn't do circus duty. Be a man? Oh! I can't, and I just won't. So there, now!"

"Would you be a vagabond?"

"Would I? Just give me a chance."

"You shall not be a vagabond!"

"Then let me settle up my worldly affairs. I don't want to live any longer. To-morrow we will go out and select a grave for me, and I will plant some but-tercups on the cold, damp sward, and the birds will come and sing roundelays and ballads—"

"Silence!"

It was a curt interruption. Ai Skinner was not like other men. In the old days Thomas had thoroughly enjoyed his strange speeches, but the charm had gone with the old life. From unfailing joviality Ai had gone to melancholy, and there was nothing to recommend him now. Life had grown tragically earnest to Thomas, and Ai had not kept pace with its developments.

The impostor fell to pacing the room, while his ally muttered his usual "Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" and allowed the conversation to die out. After some minutes the former paused. He looked at Ai, and as he saw the pitiful, child-like face, his heart softened. He went to his friend and gave him his hand warmly.

"Ai, old boy, don't think hard of me. I did not intend to be harsh. You are a trump card, and you and I will stick together through thick and thin. Don't blame me for my snappish words, for I am so wrought up over our dangers that I am not myself. Believe me, I am still your friend and defender."

And so peace was restored, much to Ai's delight. He was like a child in this reconciliation, as in all else, and he forthwith began to talk with great rapidity and buoyancy. They went to their room, and there tried to resume old relations and recover old lightness of spirits.

Thomas was sincerely anxious to solve the mystery of Nathaniel Grafton's disappearance, and presently they went out together to search for him. Of course, it was all haphazard work, and the result was as indefinite as the plan. They found nothing to reward them.

On the way back Thomas did some thinking, and ended by saying to his companion:

"Ai, I am tempted to leave Grafton's at once."

"Why?"

"Because I am an interloper there. I am not scoundrel enough to wear my stolen crown with a quiet spirit. Further, the household is now more rent up than ever. There are three factions—the gypsies, Mrs. Hart and myself, and each is at war against all others. What will come of it I don't know, but anything may result. The amiable Lee family might take it into their heads to murder everybody that is opposed to them. What worries me most, however, is the fact that Mrs. Hart is down on me."

"What do you care, Tommy?"

"Much! She has a strong mind, a clear head, a fund of suspicion and a decent nature. I would like to be at peace with her, but she is all down on me. She thinks I lured Grafton off. Ai, this is a miserable situation, and everybody is hunting us down. A terrible situation, surely."

"But you've said in the past that you dared not leave here because of the man that was killed on the pier for fear they would think we did it."

"My idea is to have Chester, Mrs. Hart and Overbridge in it, and tell them that, unless the Lees are fired out, I will go. There have been bluffs at firing the gypsies, but the resolution has not been carried out. I don't think they dare expel

them. I will make that my excuse and try to leave the house. I shall soon see Chester about it."

By that time the house was reached and they entered. Maggie Roach was near the door, and she greeted Thomas with a nod.

"Joseph Chester is in the parlor, and he wants to see you," she announced.

The chance had come sooner than expected, and there was no reason why he should not satisfy his desires. He entered the parlor, while Ai gladly retreated up the stairs.

The detective received him quietly, and motioned to a chair.

"Is there news?" Thomas asked.

"I have no clew to Mr. Grafton. Possibly there will soon be a better report, for I have sent out a general alarm, and something ought to be developed. It was not that which brought me here."

Joseph spoke with unusual gravity, and Thomas experienced a sinking of his heart. Always afraid of the detective, he was more troubled than ever since Levi Overbridge's suggestion that Chester was the real heir. He looked at his companion, now, worried by his iron-like self-control, and thinking what a strange situation it was if Chester was, indeed, Oswald Clarendon.

"If he is, what must he think of me?" thought Thomas. "He has known of my cheat from the first, yet he goes on with all the coolness in the world. He is without nerves."

If the Secret Service Expert suspected what was in the impostor's mind he gave no sign. He was very deliberate in explaining his business, but he came to time soon enough. He opened ominously.

From his pocket he took the knife which had fallen from Thomas's pocket in the chamber. The impostor's eyes opened wider. What did this portend?

Deliberately Chester handled the weapon, and then he looked up slowly.

"Are such ugly things as this common in the West Indies, captain?" he quietly inquired.

"They have knives there, as elsewhere," faintly answered Thomas.

"What did you pay for this?"

"A dollar, I think."

"In the West Indies?"

"Yes."

"Possibly you have made an error as to the price. You surely have as to the locality where you bought it. I do not claim to be informed as to West Indian blades, but this looked so very New York like that I have investigated its history. You bought it on the Bowery."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TALE TOLD BY THE TAR.

Quiet and even was the voice of the Expert, and he did not look as if the business in hand was anything out of the ordinary run, but Thomas was not deceived. He saw himself caught in a falsehood, and there was no knowing how far-reaching it might prove to be.

He had no reply ready and Chester stopped but a moment before adding, in the same tone:

"The knife came from a pawnshop in the Bowery, and it was since you came to this house that you bought it. Rather peculiar that you should have made such an error."

Thomas was pale. The matter of the knife could not easily be turned to his credit, and he knew not what else might be in store for him. He was more than ever afraid of the unmoved detective.

"There may be a mistake," he replied, in a low tone.

"How?"

"I do not think the knife is the one I purchased in the Bowery."

"How is that?"

Thomas did not know, but he tried desperately to think of an explanation.

"It may have been mixed with my West Indian knife."

"How?"

"I saw one in the Bowery that I took a fancy to and purchased it. Later, I shipped a quantity of my possessions to Savannah, where I had a friend who was

just going to sail on an ocean voyage. I intended to send him the Bowery knife, but may have sent the wrong one."

"Do you mean that you do not know the West Indian knife by sight?"

"That's it."

"What was the name of the friend in Savannah?"

"John Collison."

"And his vessel?"

"The 'Strong Arm.'"

"Telegraph him to see if he has the other knife."

"Oh! he has doubtless sailed long ago—"

"I will telegraph there to see if the 'Strong Arm,' John Collison, captain, is still in port."

Thomas Fogg's face fell. He never had heard of any such vessel, or man, and it flashed upon him that his deceit would easily be punctured if Chester kept his word. His off-hand fiction had not been a success. He sat in miserable silence until the detective resumed:

"Now, it is easy to get mixed up on such things. How about this?"

From his pocket he took a second knife and held it up prominently. It was a weapon with a long, dangerous-looking blade, and a black, rough handle.

"Isn't this your lost West Indian possession?" asked Chester.

He had spoken seductively, but Thomas was not stupid enough to put his head into a trap. He never had seen the knife, and, until its history was learned, he did not intend to admit knowledge of it, even if he needed something of the sort to help him out.

"No," he replied. "It is not at all like it."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Yet you have lost that West Indian affair?"

"So it seems."

"I did not know but this was it."

"It is not," returned Thomas, with a sudden rush of dogged firmness. "The two are no more alike than black and white. Now, let me have my turn. Where did you get that thing?"

"This," answered Joseph, unruffled, and with quiet readiness, "is the knife that killed the mysterious man on the pier the night that you first came here."

The words were like a flash of lightning to Thomas. In an instant he realized much and suspected more, and he saw how wisely he had done to deny all knowledge of the knife. He felt inclined to collapse, too, but it occurred to him that that was the proper moment to show dignified resentment. He tried to do it.

"It is not my concern what knife killed the man on the pier," he replied, "but I would like to know why you have tried to make me admit ownership of a thing with such a ghastly history."

Joseph deliberately placed the weapon in his pocket.

"Captain Clarendon," he went on, "did you ever hear of a man of the name of Big Jim Crossey?"

"I do not remember him."

"Your memory is generally good, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, this Crossey was one of the sailors on your schooner, the 'Smiling Sally.'"

"Well, what of it?"

"The 'Smiling Sally' is wrecked, and Crossey is back in New York."

It was another severe shock. If Thomas followed his companion correctly, the worst of danger was looming up. Levi Overbridge had never informed him as to the details of the schooner and her crew, for he had asserted that the 'Smiling Sally' and her men would appear no more. Now, the impostor was wholly unprepared for any such ordeal, and he knew not what to say or do.

There was a pause, and then Chester added:

"Well?"

"Well, what?" sullenly asked Thomas.

"What about Crossey?"

"I suspect that he is a fraud who has given you a sailor's yarn. I never heard

of him. He cannot have been a member of the 'Smiling Sally's' crew, unless he has two names. I know nothing about him. What of it?"

"I will tell you in a few words, captain."

The detective leaned back in his chair and began to speak in a calm, quiet way, but he wasted few words from that point on.

"Early this morning I had information from a good friend of mine, one Craps Mulligan—he is a detective aid of mine—that there was a man down South Street way that it would pay me to see. I went that way. I was taken by Mr. Mulligan to this Big Jim Crossey. Then I learned the story from the sailor."

"When the schooner 'Smiling Sally' left this port she went straight out to sea. There she was scuttled and sunk by those in charge. For some reason, Crossey was not in the plot, and he rebelled. As a consequence his amiable associates tried to put him out of the world. They took to the solitary boat of which the schooner boasted, and left him on the deck of the 'Smiling Sally' to go down with her."

"Right there they made a serious mistake. Crossey had no desire to drown, and his wits were quite equal to the occasion. He had no time to make an elaborate raft, but he fixed up a makeshift and committed himself to the waves on a box somewhat braced to meet requirements."

"To be brief, luck favored him in this venture, and, after drifting about for a day or so, he was picked up by another vessel and brought back to New York."

"I have seen him. He tells an interesting story."

Chester paused and looked meditatively at Thomas. The latter appeared to be about as miserable as a man could be, and he said nothing for several seconds. Finally he broke the pause:

"What is his story?"

"He connects the killing of the man on the pier with the schooner."

"Well, I have nothing to do with that."

"You have before told me that you knew nothing of the killing."

"True."

"The sailor says otherwise. He says the killing was known to all on the 'Smiling Sally,' and that it was because of this she hurried away by night."

Thomas saw the effort to connect him with the murder, but he did not give up seeking to clear himself.

"I have told you that I had sold the schooner. I had nothing to do with her sailing."

"Crossey tells a different story. He says the vessel was lying quietly at her pier, and there had not been a whisper looking to departure from New York. His captain—Captain Clarendon—was there with friends, and all were making merry. What next?"

"This is your story, sir," sullenly replied Thomas.

"True! The sailors got orders to run."

"Not from me."

"His impression is that the order was from you. He says it was known to all on board that murder had been done on the pier. No exact explanation was made to them, and he cannot tell all about it, but he says he understood from his messmates that Captain Clarendon had killed a man."

"Nonsense!"

"And the sailors were told to get to sea with all possible despatch."

"I know nothing about anything of the kind."

"This is very peculiar, captain," thoughtfully remarked Chester. "I do not see how the killing could be done and you know nothing about it."

Thomas looked at his companion in a rage that was barely held in check. Practically, he believed, he had been charged with the murder, yet the detective took his time and played with him cat-and-mouse style. He was adding torture to calamity.

"Who," slowly pursued Joseph, "were your companions on the vessel?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GIDEON'S DEMAND.

"That question is easily answered," replied Thomas. "My only companions on the 'Smiling Sally,' when in port, were Levi Overbridge and a certain Barney Lyons, and they were there merely in the line of business."

"Were they there," asked the detective, "when the schooner sailed?"

"No. We had all gone away. But they were there as long as I was, and with me all the while. They can certify that I did not do violence to anybody."

Thomas brightened up as he spoke. Brought to the test, an alibi founded on testimony given by his confederates would not help him much, since they were deeper in the mire than himself, but the suggestion furnished a reprieve, and placed the responsibility where it belonged.

"You say you all had left the 'Smiling Sally' before she sailed?" added the special.

"We left her at her pier."

"This does not agree with Crossey's story, but I suppose your memory must be correct."

The detective picked up his hat and indicated by his manner that the interview was over. Thomas glanced at the coat-covered arm of the investigator. Had that arm a scar halfway to the elbow? He wished he had some way of settling the point, but the coat was in the way, and he could not determine the point.

Joseph remained cool and unconcerned. He quietly added:

"I will see the others about the matter."

The detective arose, but stood looking thoughtfully at vacancy. The impression came to Thomas that he was being given time to think and see if he did not want to confess, and he was strongly tempted to speak out and throw himself on Chester's mercy. The latter was not a hard man—would it not be better to tell him all and rely on his forbearance?

The impostor opened his lips to speak, but a new recollection came to him. Merciful the special might be, but he was only an instrument in the hands of justice and law. It would not be his wish, but the demands of his office that must govern him. The law, Thomas thought, was without mercy.

He closed his lips; he said nothing.

Joseph stirred himself, added a few commonplace words, and then took his departure. The false claimant was alone.

He started up, with nervous terror pressing sharply upon him. If he had been worried before, he was doubly worried now, and wholly unnerved. He wrung his hands in despair.

"It is coming," he whispered to himself. "It is coming—exposure, accusation, arrest—and then what? Precise words could not have been more direct in accusing me of murdering the man on the pier. Chester has me in the toils! How much does he know?"

A nervous turn about the room, and then further muttered words:

"He had the old air of knowing all about it. I think he does know. He could spring his mine at any moment, if he would. It is next to certain that he knows I am not Oswald Clarendon. Cool fiend! How he plays with me like a fish on the hook! He is a demon with an exterior as mild as spring weather!"

Perhaps Chester would have been pleased with this analysis of his powers, but it did not please the impostor.

"The main question now," he pursued, "is whether he really intends to arrest me for murdering the man on the pier. That he has suspected me all along is sure, but how strong is his suspicion? Fool, fool that I was ever to yield to Levi Overbridge's seductive offer. I was happy as a vagabond, but he took me unawares. I had to decide suddenly, and I decided like an idiot. And now this cool demon has me in his grip, to toy with, to worry, to snare, to seize when he will. Human demon! And yet I could like the man under other conditions."

Thomas interrupted his melancholy

meditations and went up-stairs. He felt that he wanted to be alone, but he was not to have the chance. When he opened his door, passed in, and would have closed it, there was resistance. He turned, and saw Gideon Lee.

"A word with you," spoke the gypsy, steadily.

"I am busy, sir."

"I have business."

"Come later."

"I am here now."

Gideon was surely there. He had pushed into the room, and, as the impostor saw the folly of remonstrance, he submitted unwillingly.

"Be brief," he directed, curtly.

Gideon went to a chair. He did not have the air of a man with a short story to tell, and his leather-like face looked sterner than usual. Thomas noted this, and thought he looked ominous.

"I have something to say to you, Korgan Murch," began Gideon.

"You can say all you want to, but let one thing be understood. I am not Korgan Murch."

The gypsy made a motion as if to dispose of the question without words, and then went on relentlessly:

"We want you to produce Esrad Dyer's wife."

"I don't know his wife."

"It is the same thing. True, she obtained a divorce from him, but the gypsies do not acknowledge such a thing. Once a wife, always a wife. It is only the Americans that cast off marriage yokes as they do old clothes!" sneered Gideon.

"You weary me. I assert that I am not—"

"And again, it was you who made her get the divorce. She never had thought of deserting Esrad Dyer until you met her. Would that some of her people had been near to save her from you. But they were not, and you, Korgan Murch, won her affections away from Esrad. She was not one to think lightly, but you made her get a divorce."

"I have heard all this before—"

"Then she ran away with you. According to the laws of the Americans she was free to go with whom she chose, but the gypsies do not recognize the divorce. She went with you; you stole her, in the eyes of the gypsies."

"I never saw her."

"We have hunted long and carefully. We did not know how you looked, so we were at fault there, but we kept on tirelessly. Once we heard she was dead—a trick of yours, no doubt. We know now she is not dead. We know you brought her to this city."

"Proceed, amiable romancer!"

"You and she came here together. After that we do not know what became of her. There is much about your subsequent movements that we do not understand, but you have appeared here, and she is missing. What have you done with her?"

"Mr. Lee, you are all on the wrong track. I never saw her. I am not Korgan Murch."

"We know that you were at a place down town as Korgan Murch, and that Levi Overbridge came there and took you up. He made you an heir here, and maybe you are. Bad blood flows in the veins of the Graftons all the way through. That is not the point, however. Where is Coila?"

"I don't know. I am not the man you take me to be."

"Denial is useless. Where is the girl?"

Gideon had been keeping himself in check by a strong effort, evidently with the intention of showing his companion how positive his information was, but he was growing impatient. Thomas noted that the gypsy's eyes were changing to a dangerous glitter, and he knew that a crisis was at hand.

"I wish," replied the impostor, "that you would use a little common-sense. There never was a wilder guess than yours. I am not—"

"Is the girl dead or alive?"

"I don't know—"

"Take me to her!"

"I can't, because I don't know—"

Gideon drew forth a knife and held it suggestively.

"Take me to her," he repeated.

"Now, see here, Lee, this is not fair. I have assured you that I do not know—"

"You know where she was when you saw her last. If you have deserted her take me to where you last saw her. You can do that."

"I never saw her. I am not Korgan Murch. Let us go into this matter. Give me time, and I will prove all I claim. I never heard of this man Murch until recently, and now I—"

Gideon drove the point of the knife into the table, and, retaining his hold on the hilt, sullenly interrupted:

"The gypsy is not a fool. He does not move until he knows his information to be right. When he does act he will not take weak words for his answer. You are the man, I say, and you have the girl to account for to me. Let us waste no more words. You will produce her or die at the hands of the gypsies."

Tall, bony, muscular, sharp-featured and leathery-skinned, the avenger confronted Thomas like fate. He had grown more and more stubborn as they talked. He did not doubt his evidence, and he meant all he said. He betrayed the fact, too, and his companion knew he was in serious trouble. He made his own effort to impress the fact that he held power.

He drew his revolver and laid it in front of him.

"If you are determined to be ugly, Lee, let us settle this now."

"No! Am I all you have to deal with? Suppose you killed me to save yourself now? Gormora and Esrad would remain. They would hunt you down. You cannot slay us all! Yield! Lead to the girl!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THOMAS GETS NEWS.

Gideon Lee was imperious. It was not his way to argue a point, and, though he had schooled himself to have some patience in the present case, his stock was all exhausted. He wanted no more of idle words.

Thomas Fogg felt the same way. He could not persuade the gypsy to be reasonable, and had reached the limit of his own patience. He scowled upon Gideon as Gideon scowled upon him.

"For the last time," he retorted, "I tell you I am not Korgan Murch, and that I never saw the girl you mention. Let that end it. If you are looking for a row, go ahead!"

He raised the hammer of his revolver and looked Gideon squarely in the face. He was in one of his desperate moods, and there was not the least wavering. The gypsy saw this, and his imperious manner relapsed into sullenness once more.

"Korgan Murch, you are a fool!" he exclaimed.

"Have it as you please."

"You are defying dangerous people."

"I can fight my own battles."

"When the gypsies say they will kill they do kill."

"Proceed!"

"They kill unseen."

"Do they?"

"A knife drives as well into the back as otherwise."

"The way of a coward."

"But the vengeance of a gypsy never sleeps."

"Neither will my caution."

"We are three. You cannot guard against us all. There will not be one moment that you will be safe. Go where you will, we shall be on your track. There will be no safety in this room. Doors cannot check the wandering people, and bolts they laugh at. Three avengers, all sworn to square the account you forced upon us. Three brains to plot, and three pairs of strong hands to execute. You will have it so. Let the result tell you what a mistake you make!"

Gideon rose and went to the door. There he paused and looked back, his face twisted into a frown that might have frightened a man not already driven desperate.

"I have just one word to say," replied Thomas. "I swear to you that I am not Korgan Murch—"

The impostor stopped short. Gideon had made an impatient gesture and turned and gone from the room.

The false heir remained passive, and listened to his footsteps until another voice rose plaintively:

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!"

The impostor looked. Ai Skinner's head was protruding from under the bed, and Ai's pale face was full of worry.

"We are dead men!" added the ex-circus follower.

"Come out here. Why are you in hiding?"

"That terrible creature with the knife has been prowling around for some time, and I didn't want to be carved up until I had given more explicit directions about the buttercups to be planted on my grave. Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg, let us fly—let us fly while we can, and let us not pause until the dreary plains of snow-clad Alaska are pressed by our eager feet and fanned by our tireless wings. Come, let us fly!"

As a preliminary step to this feat, Ai crawled out from under the bed, looking dusty and disheveled, but Thomas lost no time.

"You heard the gypsy's words, didn't you?"

"All, all—and more!"

"He seeks to kill me."

"We are too young to die, Tommy."

"I have no desire to die myself, but I have got to fight or run to prevent it—"

"Let us run, Tommy," exclaimed Ai, eagerly.

"I am going to see Levi Overbridge about this. It may be that by fleeing I shall hopelessly involve myself in the slaying of the man on the pier, but that's no worse than to be stabbed in the back by a gypsy. Levi and I must have some understanding. I am going there now. I wish I could go without being suspected by the Lees. If they see me go out they may follow."

Ai suddenly brightened up.

"I will disguise you," he exclaimed. "Here!"

He snatched up the "sweater" he had used in his bicycling trips, and Thomas caught at the idea. By wearing the garment he might give the impression that he, too, was going to ride a bicycle.

He removed his coat and donned the "sweater," and then Ai insisted on adding a sash which he tied under one arm and over the other shoulder of the impostor. Thus equipped, he surveyed himself with considerable satisfaction.

"The sash is an extra," he commented, "but otherwise I look the typical bicyclist, I hope. It may deceive the gypsies, though they are shrewd people. Anyhow, I will try it."

Ai pronounced him perfect, and he proceeded to leave. Ai observed that he would be under the bed when his friend returned, and he was evidently preparing for it when Thomas went out.

Going out of the house, the impostor saw no signs of the Lees, and his hopes rose accordingly. He set off for Overbridge's office, and discerned nothing to indicate that he was followed. It was not far to the lawyer's, but when he arrived, he found that he had come too late. Levi, he was told, had gone away for the day.

"Barney Lyons remains. I will see him, if I can."

With this resolution, he went further down town to where the lawyer's ally had his quarters. He would have missed him, too, had he been a little earlier, for Barney was but just coming in, clad in his immaculate suit of black and tall hat.

He looked inquisitively at Thomas, but greeted him in a matter-of-fact way.

"Come up to my room, and we will have a smoke," he suggested. "I am feeling the need of company just now, so come up."

Barney smiled slightly as he spoke, though Thomas did not understand why. They went to the room—a plainly furnished place, with sparse, stiff furniture,

and an air as if its occupant cared nothing for it but to have a place to sleep.

The visitor was invited to lay his hat aside, and then Barney set a chair up to the little table.

"I suppose all is lovely at your place?" he then remarked.

"Things are in infernal shape!" Thomas exclaimed.

"How is that?"

"I am menaced with arrest on the one hand and the knife of a gypsy on the other."

"Arrest? Is it so bad as that?"

"Joseph Chester is as active as the Evil One in a windstorm. He does not tell his plans, but I fear him."

"Be explicit."

Thomas told of the latest meeting with the detective, and the story lost nothing by his recital, but Barney did not seem to be very much impressed.

"The fellow is bluffing you," he suggested.

"And I tell you that he is guiding things as an engineer does a train. His hand is on the throttle, and he can give her speed or ease up. He looks right through me, and he must see a mighty weak wall to buck up against. He is bound to riddle things soon, I tell you. Then there are the gypsies."

Barney had remained standing with his hat on. He now gave the hat a pull down over his eyes and sat down opposite Thomas.

"So the gypsies talk knife, do they?" he questioned.

"Yes. I am fully warned by them that they intend to do some killing. And all because of missing Coila Lee, or Dyer, or Murch, or whatever her name really is."

"Explain that part, too."

The second story was told, and Barney soon knew all about Gideon Lee's last warning. He listened in perfect silence.

"Now," pursued Thomas, warming to his subject, "I want to say that I have had enough of this. Danger is getting too thick for me, and I am going to throw up my position at Grafton's. I might as well claim to be the President of the United States as to seek to hold my stolen honors. Overbridge admits that he believes Chester himself to be the true Oswald Clarendon, and you can see how transparent my deceit is to him."

"Levi is a fool. Chester is Oswald, is he? Bah! Levi dreamed all that."

"Anyhow, I am sick of my stolen honors. I want to leave them all and take to flight."

"Have you started already?"

"I cannot start until I have money to go with. Will you give me the necessary money?"

Barney ran his hand into his pocket, and then scattered several coins on the table.

"That is the size of my pile. Two dollars, all told, maybe."

"Lyons, I need money the worst way. The game at Grafton's is played out. Now that hope is gone, am I to stay and let those villainous gypsies kill me?"

Barney broke into a laugh.

"This thing amuses me," he asserted. "See here!"

From his pocket he took two sheets of notepaper. Glancing at them briefly, he then tossed them to Thomas.

"Read!" he directed.

Thomas glanced at the first of the sheets, which proved to be a letter, and then turned a wondering gaze upon his companion. Barney was smiling with supreme satisfaction.

"What do you make of it?" he added.

"It is signed Coila Murch."

"Yes."

"And addressed to one John Rawlins, who seems to be a detective."

Barney laughed with much satisfaction.

"I am John Rawlins, Esquire, detective. Of course you recognize the writer. Well, Tommy, she is now in this house."

"What?"

"Right here."

"I don't understand this."

"I am playing the good Samaritan. Since Korgan Murch died in my service, as I may express it, I felt bound to take

care of his charming widow. I am doing it; Coila is here."

"Are you crazy, Lyons?"

"There is considerable method in my madness. The young widow is a perfect peach, old boy. You ought to see her—though I would rather you wouldn't. She is getting really interested in me, and I don't want an understudy."

"It seems to me I have not been allowed to know one-half that has been going on."

This is a side issue, and a private scheme of mine. Anyhow, the girl is here, and here the Lees must come if they want her."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DARK-SKINNED WATCHER.

Thomas stared at his host and said nothing, so Barney calmly resumed:

"You wonder why all this is. Well, when we had Korgan Murch on the string, I knew nothing of the girl, and it seems he intended to desert her for the sake of being heir to old Grafton. Anyhow, Korgan did not take her into his confidence."

"After his death I soon learned of her. I took notice of her at the beginning because I was afraid in her search for him she would do us all damage. Then when I met her I took an immense fancy to her, and I determined to befriend the dear child."

"I saw her, made her believe I was John Rawlins, detective, and offered to look up her missing lord and master. This game I have played right along. When she fell short of money, I took her here, and I now live in a house where she is housekeeper. I had to let her work for a living, for I hadn't much cash, you see."

"Such is the present situation. She is housekeeper—though I swear she won't hold the position long, for her nature is as wild as that of a hawk—and I am supposed to be busy hunting for her husband. I shall keep it up until her fancy for him cools, and then tell her he is dead. Then, why shouldn't she be Mrs. Barney Lyons?"

"Are you sure she is the daughter of the gypsies?"

"Yes."

"What if they knew it?"

"Then their knives would come in handy."

"As it is, I am the one in danger."

"So it seems."

Thomas glanced down at the letters which he had thrown on the table. A new idea was struggling in his mind.

"Those documents would set me right with the gypsies," he remarked, thoughtfully.

"Possibly."

"I think I want them."

He reached for the letters, but Barney seized his wrist and stopped him. The schemer laughed lightly.

"You have no use for them, Tommy."

"Are not the gypsies hunting me? Haven't they sworn to do me up? Here is evidence that I am innocent of secreting their missing girl, or it would be with my statement to back it up."

"Just what I don't want you to do."

"Shall I throw away the chance of safety?"

"The letters are mine!" was the reply.

"And the danger is mine!" exclaimed Thomas.

The two men looked each other in the face. Allies they might be, but there was no friendship expressed in that gaze. Barney saw he had made a mistake, but it was done, and he had to go through with it.

The impostor beheld valuable evidence within his reach, and he was called upon to let it rest. He did not take kindly to the idea. The anger of the gypsies should properly fall on the one who had been keeping her out of sight. His hand again moved forward.

"Stop!" was the command.

"Give me the evidence of my innocence!" exclaimed the impostor.

"And bring the wrath of the gypsies down on me?"

"Where should it fall?"

"Come, come, Tommy, there is no real danger."

"Then what are you scared of? Give me the letters."

"I will not."

The two men glared at each other angrily. The coveted documents lay between them, and each was anxious to possess them. Would it end in a fight?

For a time there was doubt, but each was unwilling to have trouble. Each, too, could do the other damage. They hesitated to press matters to a quarrel, and Thomas finally allowed his hand to fall. Barney hurried letters and money into his pocket.

"This is folly," he asserted. "You would not bring the anger of the gypsies down on me. They only suspect you, and will surely make no hostile move without proof."

"You don't know them," sulkily replied Thomas. "If you think you do, just send them word that the girl is here."

"Thank you, but I don't want any row."

"Just my idea, and I tell you I am going to skip out of New York. I ask you and Levi Overbridge to give me money enough to get to a safe place. It will amaze you to see me go."

"And give up all for which we have schemed?"

"We shall give up nothing worth having, for all we possess is peril. My deceit is plain to Chester, and he can nip me whenever he sees fit."

Barney began to see that his visitor was in full earnest, and, though his own opinion coincided pretty closely with all that was said, he undertook to cheer Thomas up. If the latter ran away, it surely would end all hopes of success at Grafton's, and a fortune would go out of sight. This was just what Barney did not want, and he argued his best.

"We will try to remove the gypsies," he promised.

"How?"

"They are not the only ones who carry a heavy hand. They think because they have desperate natures that they can bluff their way as they please. I will see to that."

"What can you do?"

"Did you ever hear of Bowery boys?"

"Well?"

"I'll set a few bold fellows upon the Lees and wipe them out of existence. In fact, it may be necessary for my own good. It seems that Coila is a dangerous possession."

The impostor was not satisfied, but Barney talked until he had obtained a promise that Thomas would do nothing radical until he saw Levi Overbridge.

"We can drift no longer," admitted the schemer. "We must fight or go under. We will fight."

"And win?"

"Dead sure!"

After some further talk Barney succeeded in instilling some of his confidence into his companion, and Thomas left the house in a better frame of mind. After all, they might succeed in fighting their way through their dangers.

When Thomas moved away he looked as he had done when he came there, to see if he was under watch by any enemy. He saw nothing to indicate this, and he soon disappeared around the corner.

When he was gone there was a stir in a doorway near at hand and a man came out to the sidewalk. He sent one glance toward the point where the impostor had disappeared, and then turned his gaze upon the house where Barney Lyons lived.

The man was Esrad Dyer.

"I think I have the secret," he murmured.

The house was but an ordinary one in appearance, but the gypsy seemed to find it anything but commonplace. He looked it over with careful attention, and scrutinized long and closely.

"She is there!" he finally muttered.

"I have followed Korgan Murch to his lair, and his secret is mine. He did not

hide so fast but that patience has solved the riddle. She is there."

His dark eyes glittered with intense feeling, and his hand sought the pocket where he carried his ever-ready and trusty knife.

"I could go there now and get her, but it would not do. They would call in the police, and here the American has everything his own way. They would take part against the wandering people, for they have sold their souls to the Americans. Death to the police!"

It was the old cry of a man contemplating an act to break the law, but Esrad believed all he said. He soon grew more practical. He studied the situation of the house carefully.

His was not a patient nature, but he realized that he must go slow and sure in the work he had to do. He tried to plan for it. To him the house looked strong and hard to enter, but he saw other means of accomplishing his end.

The house next to it was much smaller, and the roof was on a level with the upper windows of the larger building. He believed it possible to gain that roof by one of the various means presented to his vision, and, if he could, he would be able to enter the house where he believed Coila was.

Once there—well, he knew what to do.

He remained some time looking the scene over, but when a patrolman appeared down the block, he shambled off in the opposite way.

"To-night!" he muttered.

He went to his own stopping place. It was a mean house, down near the Bowery, but it was cheap, and had answered all his requirements. There he had lived since coming to New York—lived and hunted for Korgan Murch.

Having gained his room he closed the door and was alone. In his way he was exultant, for he thought victory was close at hand, but he showed no signs of exhilaration. He sat down and meditated. Pierce, tempestuous and cruel that he was, he was harboring hopes that he would again secure Coila and have her all to himself. He believed that if Korgan Murch was dead, she would care for him as she had done in the past. He intended to have her again, and the hour seemed near. He nursed the hope and was triumphant.

"To-night!" he muttered, again.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GYPSIES GROW UGLY.

Darkness was near at hand, and the household at Grafton's had just finished supper. It was a curious meal that they invariably made. With so many conflicting elements, there were many tables and several rooms for eating, and Maggie Roach prayed daily for the time there would be a break in proceedings.

This evening Ai Skinner was not one of those who partook. When Thomas returned from his visit to Barney Lyons he did not find Ai, but he was told that Gideon Lee had frightened the ex-circus man, and that Ai had thereupon taken sudden leave.

Having eaten, the impostor went to his room and engaged in thought. Barney had raised his hopes for a while, but the revulsion had come, and Thomas was as hopeless as ever.

"Why continue a losing fight?" he mused. "I may as well make a clean breast of it, first as last. I want to throw off this despicable yoke I took up in a moment of heedless folly."

He considered the point until he became too nervous to remain quiet. He started up and went to the window. Night was settling outside, and he stood and watched the street mechanically. Suddenly two persons crossed the line of his vision. One was Ai Skinner, and the other—Thomas started as he caught sight of him.

It was Nathaniel Grafton.

Straight toward the house came the two, and they were soon on the stoop. Thomas aroused and hurried down to

meet them. When he gained the hall they had already entered.

Ai was beaming in his child-like way, and he broke forth immediately.

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg! I've brought him home. Do you see? I've found him, and here he is."

"This is glad news, indeed. I trust—"

"I think I shall blossom out as a detective. I am a good deal sharper than Chester, I do believe, and you will see I have brought him home—"

"Silence, parrot!"

Nathaniel broke in fiercely, and he succeeded in crushing Ai at the first attempt. The latter at once grew serious and sad, and had no more to say.

"Mr. Grafton, I am delighted to see you home," asserted Thomas. "We feared some mishap had befallen you, and we—"

"Am I not able to care for myself?" angrily demanded Nathaniel.

"Certainly, sir, but—"

"Then don't let me have any more nonsense about it. There has been too much wrangling in this house, and I went off to get rid of it. Now I am back, and I intend to be master of my own house, and prevent any more unseemly quarreling. All will take notice. Possibly I may see you in the morning, but just now I want to be alone. I am going to be alone."

With this sharp announcement Nathaniel glared at his supposed heir and passed on up the stairs. His step was firmer than usual, and the brief absence seemed to have given him mental and physical vigor.

"He needs it," thought Thomas. "I hope he will keep up to the mark he has set."

Nathaniel vanished from his sight, and then Ai explained at considerable length how he had happened on the old gentleman half a dozen blocks away. Grafton had accosted him and questioned him as to affairs at the house, but had given no further light on his own movements than to say that he had gone away to "get a little peace," and that he had been all the while in the house of a friend.

There seemed to be nothing to do but obey the request of the late wanderer and leave him alone, and this they proceeded to do.

Grafton was cordially received by Mrs. Hart, and to her he told the same story already given, so his absence was accounted for and reckoned as something of importance no longer.

He continued to show much of his old vigor for some time, but another trial was before him. No sooner had the gypsies learned of his presence than they made their appearance at his door and asked to see him.

"It is impossible!" declared Mrs. Hart, in reply.

"Let them come in!" cried Grafton, from his chamber.

"But you need rest, sir!" the housekeeper expostulated.

"If they have business, let them come," was the order.

"Wait until to-morrow."

"Now will do!"

With this curt reply Gormora tried to push past, and, as Nathaniel's voice again rose from the room, Mrs. Hart yielded. Gormora and Gideon marched in with heavy steps.

Once there they stopped and looked the old gentleman over, as if they thought it possible he had undergone some great change during his brief absence. He met their gaze coolly, and with unusual firmness, was the first to speak.

"What's wanted?" he demanded.

"Nathaniel Grafton, we are here on business," announced Gideon.

"Out with it."

"Will you do justice to-night?"

"Justice is seldom law," Grafton replied, looking as if he had said something new. "What do you want?"

"That you should acknowledge Zarah as your daughter and Kyzelia's."

"Oh! is it that harp with one string again? It is tiresome."

"We can wait no longer," Gormora

broke in, peremptorily. "Something must be done. Will you acknowledge her?"

"Not until you bring your proof!" cried Mrs. Hart.

"Woman, who asked you to speak?" snapped Gormora, glaring at the housekeeper.

"I might well answer, who asked you?"

"I am here for justice."

"Your claim is ridiculous."

"Prove it!"

"I will, as soon as you prove yours."

"Women with the tireless tongues!" interrupted Gideon. "We waste words. You speak only nonsense. Let us to business. Nathaniel Grafton, you ask for proof before admitting our claim. Give us the means of getting the proof. Give us something to keep Zarah, your daughter, while she waits your slow-moving justice. Give us money."

"Money!" cried Mrs. Hart, suddenly rousing.

"Peace!" commanded Gideon. "I address your master."

"You will get no money here," persisted the housekeeper.

Ignoring her, Gideon laid a check-book before Nathaniel. He pointed to the first slip that had not been removed and was about to speak, but Mrs. Hart was ahead of him.

"Where did you get that book?"

"Since you are so anxious to know," deliberately responded Gideon, "I came in here and took it from Grafton's desk. It is his book. He has used a full dozen slips from it already. He will now use another. Here, sir! Here is pen and ink. Take it! Write! Fill out a check for five thousand dollars!"

"Five thousand!" gasped Nathaniel.

"Five thousand!" icily replied the gypsy.

"What do you want of it?"

"Zarah, your daughter, wants it."

"I object to signing for so much money. Do you think I am made of money? You say she is my child. Well, she has a home, hasn't she? That is enough until you prove your claim."

"It is not enough," coldly answered Gideon. "Do you think the gypsies have nothing to do but to eat? Have they need of no more? I asked a man who knew you how much he thought you were worth. He replied, two hundred thousand dollars. With so much you would not keep all from Zarah—"

"He would!" declared Mrs. Hart.

"Well, he will not. He will obey me in this or there will be instant trouble. The gypsies have long enough borne with you all, and put up with your foibles. There shall be no more of it. It is all a scheme to beat us off and to rob us of our rights. This night there must be a change in the situation. We need money. We demand it. We will have it! Sign!"

Gideon rapped his fingers on the check-book, and Gormora echoed his call:

"Sign!"

Nathaniel looked at Mrs. Hart. It was not so much a mute call on his part for aid as a question, it seemed, as to what he should do. There was no doubt in her mind, and she defiantly exclaimed:

"He will not sign. You have a new scheme to worry money out of him, but you plot in vain. Not one cent will you get from him. He will not sign the check!"

Gormora swooped down upon the bold speaker, her eyes changing color in her excitement.

"Do you keep out of this!" the gypsy woman harshly ordered. "Don't dare to interfere further. Servant, know your place. He will sign, and if you seek to prevent it you will suffer. Look!"

Gormora drew a knife and waved it in her adroit way.

"Gideon," she added, "go on with the work. Get his signature. I will see to this meddlesome servant. Go on!"

"Sign!" repeated Gideon, in his icy tone.

Mrs. Hart broke through the gypsy line, seized the book and stood at bay, as resolute as were they.

"He will not sign!" she repeated, stoutly.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A STRONG HAND AT THE HELM.

There was a dramatic pause. Mrs. Hart had taken decisive action, and the gypsies were at a loss what to do. She was no puny woman, or they might have disdained her bold stand, but she had muscular and mental force equal to their own, and they knew it. To add to their perplexity Nathaniel Grafton repeated, like a child with its lesson well learned:

"I will not sign."

"Are you going to be domineered over by a servant?" sneered Gormora, bitterly.

"At least, I am not a vagabond gypsy!" defiantly retorted the housekeeper.

"She is mistress here," supplemented Nathaniel. "She has full charge of the house."

"Has she charge of you, too? Have you no will of your own? Will you be browbeaten by a woman?"

"She knows what is best for me," sighed Nathaniel.

It was plain that the housekeeper had the upper hand, and Gormora looked at the check-book with strong passion in her expression. Then she stretched out her hand, and imperiously exclaimed:

"Give it to me!"

"I will not! It belongs here—it stays!"

"You are unjust," peevishly added Grafton. "I have given a home to all of you. What more do you want?"

"Money!" Gideon briefly explained.

"You ask too much."

"The gypsies are neither fools nor people of power. Well do they know the cunning and injustice of the Americans. Every day that we allow ourselves to be bluffed off by you gives you more chance to cheat us out of our rights. At your bidding the law and its workers in this big town will spring upon us, panther-like. Justice will not be ours; truth will count for nothing. You will hatch a plot to baffle us, to baffle justice. We refuse to give you the delay you covet. We want something now. Give us money. Sign the check!"

"He will sign no check," reassured Mrs. Hart.

"I will sign no check," asserted Nathaniel, sharply.

There was silence in the room. Both of the Lees looked at the housekeeper, and there was bitter hatred in their scrutiny. She could easily believe that if they had the chance they would settle the quarrel by removing her from their path forever.

Only for her steady resistance they would long before have been absolute rulers over the weakened master of the house, and they knew it as well as she.

It required remarkable nerve to face them defiantly now, but she was not at a loss. She looked and did not waver.

"Woman," presently spoke Gideon, "you are making a mistake in this matter. Do you think the gypsies are mere clods? Do you think they will not stand up for their rights, or that they will rest in idleness and allow you to ruin their hopes and defeat their rights?"

"As to their rights, I suspect they knew they have none. All things go to prove that this is purely blackmail. It will not succeed."

"I shall pay nothing," repeated Nathaniel.

The assertion was barely out of his mouth when the door opened and two men entered. They were Thomas and Joseph Chester, the special. The latter looked as undisturbed as ever, and, nodding to Gideon, spoke at once.

"There will be nothing paid," he added.

"How dare you interfere here?" demanded the gypsy, hotly.

"I speak in the name of the true heir."

He waved his hand to Thomas, but the latter started forward a step, seeming to be much excited.

"Do not use my name here," he requested. "I want to have none of it. Chester, when I sent for you just now, I told you it was to defend Mr. Grafton from the gypsies. I was right in this, but I had more of an object. I will make it plain now."

He paused briefly, swept his gaze from

one to another of those present, and finally allowed it to rest upon Nathaniel.

"I have no sermon to preach on right and honor," he added, "but I am enough of a man to feel for another man who is no longer young, and is beset by enemies! I am the worst of these enemies!"

"You?" questioned the detective, though he did not seem surprised.

"Yes, I! This very hour I will put an end to a deceit I have entered into foolishly, heedlessly, criminally, yet with some grain of excuse. When I have spoken out I am ready to go to prison."

"Why should you go?"

"Because I am not what I have claimed to be—I am not Oswald Clarendon!"

Thomas made the assertion as if he expected somebody to deny it, and almost defiantly, but the special merely smiled.

"You are joking now."

"I am not, sir. I mean all that I say. I have been sailing under false colors ever since I entered this house. Now, I proclaim the truth. My name is not Clarendon—it is plain Thomas Fogg."

"Then why have you claimed to be what you have?"

"An heir was wanted here; I was fool enough to seek to get the chance, so I claimed a false identity."

"What led you to do it?"

"I might almost answer, temporary insanity. To be more precise, I yielded to temptation and tried to make myself out Oswald Clarendon. I am not he; I never was he. I am not an heir here; not one drop of the family blood is in my plebeian veins."

"Did you know Oswald, or Mr. Grafton?"

"No."

"Then why did you suddenly appear as candidate for the position? How did you know an heir was wanted? How did you learn enough of the Grafton affairs to carry on the deceit?"

Thomas hesitated. He had resolved to confess even if he went to prison for it, but he had a vein of loyalty in his make-up which made him reluctant to betray Levi Overbridge, rascal that the lawyer was. He had determined not to betray him, but himself shoulder all the blame. He knew that Levi deserved punishment, and was willing it should come to him, but not through his efforts.

"You will pardon me," he presently answered, "if I remain silent on that point. It should be enough that I am an impostor here, and ready to abandon my false claim. I do abandon it. I will relieve Mr. Grafton of one of the cormorants that have fed on his lifeblood. As soon as I have permission I will go hence and worry nobody further."

"Why have you confessed?" Chester proceeded.

"Chiefly because I want to be a man again."

Thomas stood more erect, and his manner took on a new dignity.

At this juncture Maggie Roach appeared with the announcement:

"Mr. Levi Overbridge is down-stairs."

The name seemed to impress the detective strongly, and he did not wait to see what anybody else would do about it.

"Show him up!" he exclaimed, quickly.

The servant departed, and the special turned a questioning gaze upon Thomas. The latter exhibited embarrassment, plainly showing that he felt for his partner in wrong-doing, and would willingly have been saved from the suspicion of having betrayed him.

In due time Mr. Overbridge came. He had not been in any degree prepared for the meeting, and, when he passed the door and saw so many assembled, he stopped short and seemed confused. His regard went suddenly to Thomas, and he questioned with his eyes.

Joseph surprised everybody by going forward, taking Lawyer Levi's hand, and shaking it cordially.

"My dear sir, you are very welcome," he declared. "Nobody else could so well fit in here as you."

Overbridge found some obstruction in his throat, and he made a determined effort to clear it away.

"In what way can I be of service?" he inquired, directly.

"Our friend yonder, Mr. Fogg, has been telling us how he has deceived Mr. Grafton by claiming to be Oswald Clarendon. Pray, how did he deceive you? How did you make such a mistake?"

"Mistake? A—a—I make a mistake? He has said what? He not Captain Clarendon? Then there is, indeed, a grievous error!"

"How did you fall into the error, Overbridge?"

"Is there one? Bless me, sir, I don't understand this. A mistake? He not Clarendon? Dear me, I don't see into it. He is mistaken now, surely."

"He is not. He admits that he is only plain Thomas Fogg, and I believe him. Shall I tell you why? Well, because, to be frank, I am the real Oswald Clarendon!"

Nathaniel Grafton had been following the conversation as well as he was able with his weakened mind. Now he started up suddenly.

"You Oswald Clarendon?" he gasped.

"I am that person," continued the detective, rapidly, giving them no more time for words. "I am the boy who ran away from here fifteen years ago. I preferred to work my own way in the world, and I did it. I changed my name; I finally became a detective and special. That's all that need be said of me."

He turned swiftly to the gypsies. They had been standing together, sullen and silent, but he now made them central figures.

"I am heir here," he added. "You can get out."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE FINAL GREAT SURPRISE.

Gideon Lee raised his hand and shook it at the plain-speaking detective. He had lost no interest in his case while waiting, and he did not intend to yield if there were a dozen heirs in the field.

"I will not get out for you or anybody else!" he cried. "I will have what is due the gypsies!"

"We will have justice," added Gormora, hotly.

"You are pretty people to talk of justice! You have shown your hand in your attempt to fix on Thomas Fogg a crime never committed. You believed that the disappearance of Nathaniel Grafton meant that he might never come back, so you tried to brand Thomas of crime. You stole his knife, smeared it with some sort of blood that was not Grafton's, and slipped the knife into Thomas's pocket—"

"All is fair in war. We did do it," admitted Gideon.

"Your party is too skillful with knives for the good of the community. I happen to know that your good friend, Esrad Dyer, has done something in that line himself. He hunted Korgan Murch down and killed him with a knife-thrust on the pier."

"Yonder is Korgan Murch!" and Gormora pointed to Thomas.

"You repeat Esrad's error. He was right when he struck that man on the pier—that was the real Korgan Murch—and Esrad's vengeance was satisfied; but he knew that Korgan was also called Captain Clarendon on board the schooner 'Smiling Sally,' so, when Thomas appeared here, he supposed he had made a mistake in striking the man on the pier. It was no mistake; he had the real Korgan then, and Esrad was revenged."

"I care nothing for that," interrupted Gormora. "My grandchild, Zarah, is heir here ahead of all others. I demand her rights."

"Slowly, gypsy grandmother. You have more to learn. You know very little of the history of the past. We admit that Nathaniel Grafton married Kyzelia, your daughter. We admit that there was issue by this marriage. More—a fact you do not seem to know—twin children were born of the marriage, a boy and a girl."

"We know all that, but the boy died."

"Wrong! The girl died—the boy lived!"

"Proof!" shouted Gormora. "Proof!"

"Here is the witness!"

The detective waved his hand, and Mrs. Hart moved a little forward. Those there had rarely seen her so moved. Her face, usually of full color, was now pale, and she gave every evidence of being in a painful position.

"I will speak," she uttered, in a hushed voice. "It is not to my taste, but this house must be cleared of vipers. I was present when Kyzelia, wife of Nathaniel Grafton, gave birth to the twin children."

"You?" gasped Gormora, amazed.

"I was the nurse, and the only one."

"Impossible."

"I was there, I say, and I, alone, know the full history of that affair. Let me be frank. I had been engaged to marry Nathaniel Grafton, but he went on a summer's outing, met Kyzelia Lee, fell in love with her, and married her."

Nathaniel rocked back and forth in his chair.

"Fool, fool that I was!" he muttered.

"If I had known the truth," added Mrs. Hart, her eyes flashing suddenly, "I should have let him rest, but it was a case of mysterious disappearance, as far as his friends knew, and when detectives failed to locate him, I, alone, took up the search. It was a year before I found any trace, and when I did I found, not Grafton, but his deserted wife. Briefly, indeed, should I have stopped with her, but it was a time when a woman's care was needed. I, the cast-off betrothed, acted as nurse to the dusky-skinned wife."

There was a pause, and even the gypsies did not care to break it.

"I trust," pursued Mrs. Hart, with dignity, "that I did my duty like a well-meaning woman."

"Nobly, nobly!" muttered Nathaniel, still rocking with an appearance of distress.

"The gypsy mother died," continued the housekeeper, "and so did one of her children—the girl. The boy lived. It was alone with me, as its mother had been alone. Of course I cared not to adopt my rival's child; I placed the infant with a family in the country region."

"Then I returned to New York. Here I met Nathaniel Grafton. He was ready to renew the engagement with me, and when I told him his wife was dead he tried to press it upon me. I declined. I will not weary you with a long recital of the next few months. You shall hear the result of numerous deliberations on our part."

"Mr. Grafton was failing in health even then, and he besought me to remain with him as housekeeper. He promised me good pay, and full power here, as well as perfect freedom from further mention of the subject that had grown distasteful to me. You may wonder at my choice, but I looked upon the offer in a business light. I accepted; I came here as housekeeper."

"After I had settled a small house on the East Side upon her as means of support, in case I died suddenly," added Nathaniel.

A look of annoyance on Mrs. Hart's part told that she had not intended to mention the house, but she was just what she claimed—a woman with business inclinations. She had correctly described the past. She had been Grafton's housekeeper, and well had she performed the part. Their old engagement had been ignored by both through a score of years—ignored forever.

"We wander from the subject," suddenly added Mrs. Hart. "I have told you that Kyzelia's daughter died, so Zarah cannot be she. Now, let a better tongue say the rest. The son of Kyzelia and Nathaniel Grafton lived. What of him?"

As she spoke she turned to Joseph Chester. The special quietly pointed to Thomas Fogg.

"He is there!" Chester calmly assumed.

"There? Where?" demanded Nathaniel.

"Thomas Fogg is the lost heir. He is Nathaniel Grafton's child by his marriage with Kyzelia Lee!"

Utter silence followed, and nobody else was so much amazed as Thomas. He was really too much astonished to speak.

"Listen," pursued the detective, after waiting briefly. "I have yet to tell you my most important discovery. When Mrs. Hart, angered and constantly annoyed by the Lee family, admitted enough of the past to give me a clew, I set out to learn what had become of the half-gypsy boy she had left with the old farmer, up-country, so long ago. I easily learned that the farmer, whose name was Phineas Fogg, had reared the boy as Thomas Fogg, his adopted son, but the boy had wandered away from his childhood home after his supposed parents died. It was not so easy to learn the rest, but the stumbling tongue of Ai Skinner had given me the real name of the false Captain Clarendon, and I had one of the old neighbors of the Fogg's down here to identify him, which he did."

"And he," added Mrs. Hart, pointing to Thomas, "is the son of Kyzelia Lee and Nathaniel Grafton."

"And Grafton's true heir," supplemented the special.

"Amazing," muttered Overbridge.

"The word fits well, sir," agreed Joseph. "You wanted an heir to pass off as Oswald Clarendon. You took one by chance. By the same chance you took, not Oswald, but one who had a far better claim upon Grafton's money—you took Grafton's own son to pass off as somebody else. You say well; it is amazing!"

"It is impossible!" exclaimed Thomas, finding his tongue.

"It is true. At last, you really are Grafton's heir."

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" cried another person, shrilly, "I guess we are in luck, after all. I shall not need to have those buttercups planted on my grave yet."

With this Ai Skinner rushed in and seized Thomas in his arms, full of exultation and beaming with smiles.

Gideon and Gormora were looking at Thomas in a way anything but friendly. Really, they never had learned much about the last days of Kyzelia, but Zarah was a full sister to Korgan Murch's wife, their mother having been Abishael Lee, daughter of Gormora; and Gideon and Gormora knew they had as little to expect from Thomas as from the law. Yet, Gideon made one final effort.

"In any case, we have rights here, and we demand—"

Right here the special interrupted imperiously:

"Demand nothing! Robbers and intruders, you will find it well to relapse into silence and inactivity. Had you shown one spark of affection for Kyzelia's child in his infancy you might claim something now. You did not even seek to see him; you did not even know his sex. You have no claim on us now, and I give you just one day to get out of New York. Before another day dawns Esrad Lee will be arrested for murdering Korgan Murch on the pier. Esrad will not go with you. But do you go, or the law will have you. The game is played out!"

The slayer of Korgan Murch was not arrested. The next morning he and Barney Lyons were found side by side in the latter's room, both fatally wounded as the result of a fight between them. Esrad had gone to seize Colla. Instead, he had met his fate, and Barney had suffered with him, while the cause of their quarrel had escaped wholly. The two men died of their injuries.

Lawyer Levi Overbridge was not spared. He was prosecuted and sent to prison. In the same place is Dan Flint, who was tried for wounding Bob Brown.

Craps Mulligan was duly rewarded for his good service to the special.

After all, Thomas remained at the Grafton house, and all things went on harmoniously. He and Mrs. Hart watch over Nathaniel, caring for him as he grows weaker and nears his end. His had not been a noble life, but, in his extremity, the old man became one of the Almighty's creatures, to them, and worthy of care. By and by Thomas will have the bulk of his property, but enough will go to Mrs. Hart to make her comfortable for life.

Ai would have become an inmate of the house permanently, but good luck came to the ex-circus follower. He inherited money and has a home of his own, where he is happy and full of his old high spirits.

"Oh! Tommy, Tommy Fogg!" he recently exclaimed; "how much pleasure I would have missed if I never had been born!" He prefers not to think of their early days at Grafton's—and so does Thomas.

Of the Lee family nothing is now known by their former acquaintances in New York. They took Chester's advice and departed quickly from the city. Once, since, they have been heard from, and it is known that Colla and Zarah are with Gideon and Gormora. More is not known, but they are all doubtless following their former wandering life.

The headquarters special remains a detective, adding to his fame and running new clews to earth. He retains his adopted name, and, though he sees Thomas often and has learned to like him, he visits the Grafton house but little.

THE END.

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